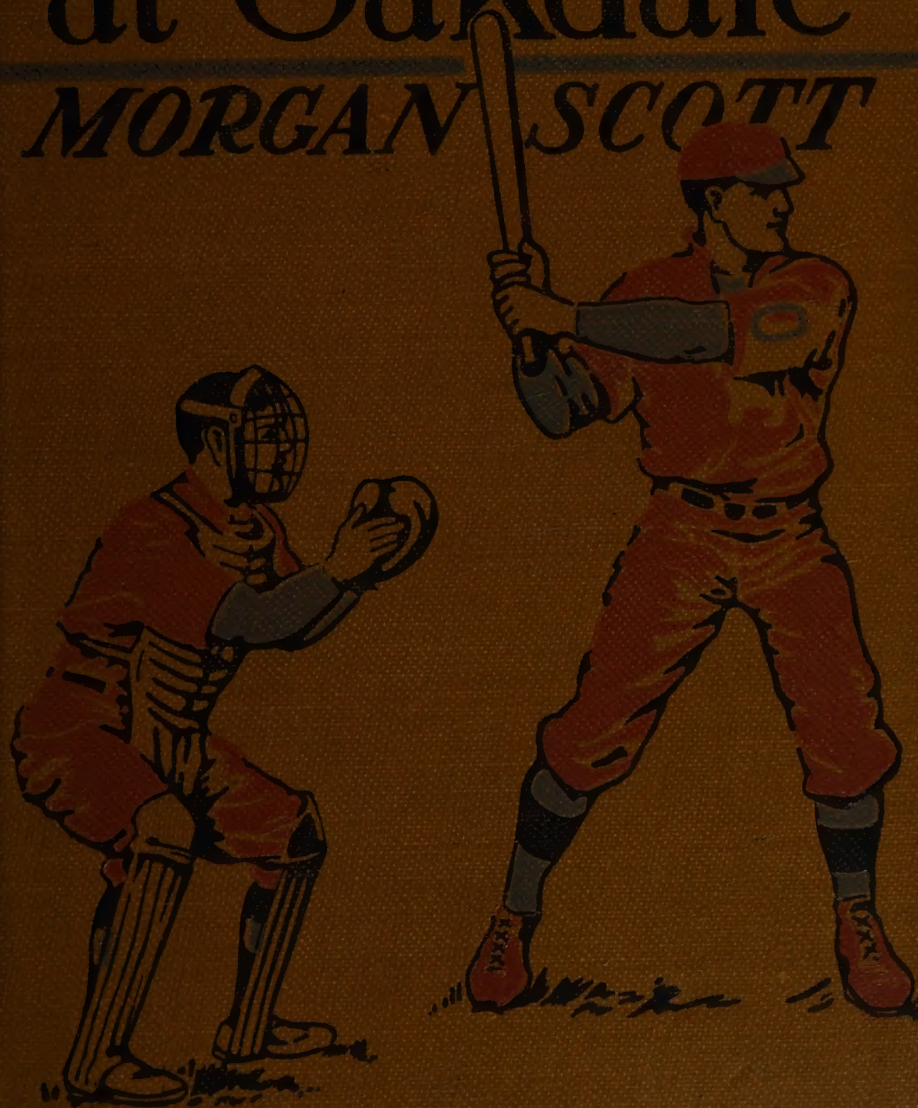


The New Boys at Oakdale

MORGAN SCOTT



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Frank
from
Mamie

1924



HE THRUST OUT HIS HAND FOR OSGOOD TO TAKE.—Page 307.

THE NEW BOYS AT OAKDALE

By MORGAN SCOTT

AUTHOR OF

"Ben Stone at Oakdale," "Boys of Oakdale Academy,"
"Rival Pitchers of Oakdale," "Oakdale Boys in
Camp," "The Great Oakdale Mystery," etc.



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The New Boys at Oakdale

CHAPTER I.

AN ORDER DISOBEYED.

Oakdale started the game by hammering Ollie Leach, the Wyndham pitcher, for three runs in the first inning. Indeed, it seemed that they would drive the schoolboy twirler from the slab in short order, and they might have done so only for a snappy, clean-cut double play which put an abrupt end to the fusillade of hits. When the Wyndham captain declined to make a change and sent Leach back to the mound in the second inning, the wondering Oakdalers told one another that they would finish the foolhardy southpaw then and there.

Leach, however, had steadied down a great deal, and the best the visitors could do was to

squeeze in one more run, which they practically secured through a rank error by Peltz, the short-stop. At this point the successful batting of the visitors seemed to come to an abrupt end, for during the succeeding four innings Ben Stone was the only man who could hit the lefthander safely.

Meanwhile, Rodney Grant was doing some steady, clever pitching for Oakdale, which, with perfect support, would have prevented the locals from gathering a single tally. Ned Osgood committed the first costly blunder. Covering third for Oakdale, he attempted to make a fancy play on a grounder, and let it get through him, enabling a Wyndham runner to score from second after two were out.

In the fifth, with two Wyndhamites gone, Charley Shultz, in the middle garden, tried to pull down a fly with one hand when he could have easily reached it with both hands, and his muff gave the locals another valuable mark in the scorer's book.

Jack Nelson, the Oakdale captain, reprimanded

Shultz when, following a strike-out, the team trotted to the bench.

"You should have had that fly, Charley," said Nelson sharply; "and you would have got it if you'd went after it with both hands instead of one. That's the first time I've seen you drop a ball you could reach as easily as that one. Quit your grandstanding and play baseball."

Shultz shot Nelson a sullen look. "Oh, what's the use to holler?" he retorted. "I knew best whether I could reach it with both hands or one. I think I know how to play that field."

Nelson's teeth came together with a click, and for a moment, his cheeks burning hotly, it seemed that his annoyance and anger would master him, but he succeeded in holding himself in check.

"You can play the field all right, Shultz," he said, "and it's just because you can that I disapprove of that attempted fancy flourish. We've got to hold these chaps down somehow."

"Oh, don't worry," laughed Osgood optimistically. "We've got them beaten now. We won the game in the first inning."

"Mebbe we did, but we didn't paound Lefty Leach off the slab," reminded Sile Crane. "Gall hang that feller! I hit him once, but I'll be switched if I can seem to do it ag'in. He's sorter got me locoed!"

"He seems to have rattled everybody belonging to this whole bunch," said Chipper Cooper. "We ain't any of us doing ourselves proud—'cepting old Stoney."

Nor did they improve in the first of the sixth. Leach was working a sharp drop that had them all breaking their backs to the distasteful music of the Wyndham cheers. Grant was effective in the latter half, and the seventh opened with him at bat.

"Start us off, Rod," implored Nelson, as the Texan secured his bat and left the bench. "Let's sew this thing up with some more runs."

The fellow from the Lone Star State made no reply, but he squared himself grimly in the batters' box and took the measure of one of Lefty's drops. The hit was, appropriately, a

Texas leaguer, and the visiting spectators howled joyously as Rod capered to first.

Chipper Cooper, coaching on the line back of first, flapped his arms wildly and crowed like a rooster. As the cheering of the little knot of Oakdale Academy students died down somewhat, Chipper was heard whooping joyously:

"Here we go! The lucky seventh! Don't try to steal second, Rod; that would be a base thing to do. We're after old Lefty again, and now we'll finish the job we started in the first round."

On the opposite side of the diamond Phil Springer, likewise enthused and excited, was wildly stuttering at the same time:

"Gug-gug-great work, Gug-Gug-Grant. Some cuc-cuc-class to that little bub-bingle. Take a gug-gug-good lead. Shultzie saw how you dud-dud-did it. He'll drive you round."

There was in this contest between rival high school nines little of that calculation and method employed by professionals and generally termed "inside baseball." Nevertheless, Jack Nelson knew the importance of team work and had done

his best to drill his players in some of the rudiments. The deadly accuracy of the Wyndham catcher's throwing to bases was well known to the Oakdale lads, and, with no one down, an attempt to steal seemed inadvisable to Nelson. Shultz, the next batter, had been hitting the ball hard, even though he had found it impossible to place his hits safely, and instantly Nelson spoke a word to him and signalled to the watchful Texan at first that it was to be a hit-and-run.

On previous occasions, with the situation similar, the visitors had seemed to prefer sacrificing; and so, as Shultz confidently took his position at the plate, the infield drew closer, every fellow on his toes to go after a bunt or a short grounder.

Leach made sure his support was prepared for action, and then, wetting his fingers, he handed up a high whistler that had a bit of a jump on it.

Even though the ball was on a level with his cap visor, Shultz managed to hit it, boosting a high fly toward the smiling sky.

Grant was half way down to second when he heard a shrill, warning cry from both coaches.

"Look out! Get back! Skyscraper!" shrieked Cooper.

"Hey! Bub-bub-bub-bub——" Springer continued to "bub" even after the galloping Texan had plowed his spikes into the ground, brought himself to a halt and turned to race desperately back to the initial sack.

Little Peltz got under that high one and reached for it eagerly in his great desire to make the catch and turn it into a double play by a throw that should reach first ahead of the returning runner. For the moment, with the exception of the still shrieking coaches, every spectator seemed breathless and silent. Peltz got the ball, froze to it and made a beautiful throw, but Grant's amazing promptness in stopping and getting back at high speed saved him by a yard or more, and he was declared safe at first.

"Pretty close, pretty close," cried Baxter, the Wyndham captain.

"Missed by a mile," contradicted Cooper, in-

tensely relieved. "You can't rope this wild Texas steer; he's never been branded."

"Cuc-cuc-come on, Osgood," implored Springer, as the next hitter was seen to rise from the bench; "you're the boy to do the trick."

Already Nelson had given Ned Osgood his instructions.

"Bunt, Osgood," were his swift words. "They may look for us to follow up with a hit-and-run. Sacrifice Grant along on the second ball pitched. Stone is the next batter."

That he was right in his judgment concerning the locals was proven by the fact that the infielders resumed their regular positions, while the outfielders fell back a little. Persistent plugging at the hit-and-run game is frequently resorted to by teams having poor success through other methods, and the action of Baxter in signaling his players to fall back showed that he believed an attempt would be made to repeat the play that had been foiled through Shultz's high infield fly.

Leaning forward in a natural position, with

his elbows on his knees and the fingers of his hands interlocked, Nelson thus telegraphed to Grant that the hitter would let the first ball pass and try to sacrifice on the next.

Jack's foresight seemed excellent, for, fancying the visitors would be eager to continue the hit-and-run attempt, Leach "wasted one" on Osgood, who did not even remove his bat from his shoulder.

"Let him do it again," piped Cooper. "Let him put himself in a hole, Osgood, then pick out a good one when he has to put it across."

Osgood, although he liked the game, was both obstinate and conceited, having a great deal of confidence in himself as a batter and believing that he knew as much about baseball as any fellow on the team.

Therefore, perceiving that the next ball was coming over slightly more than waist high and apparently just where he wanted it, he declined to bunt and swung with all his force, hoping to make a long, sensational drive which would go safe and cover him with glory. Instead of doing

this, he smashed a hot grounder straight into the hands of Foxhall, the second baseman.

Grant, fully expecting a sacrifice, was again racing down the line from first, and now he had no time to turn back. Without delay, yet with a deliberation that made for sureness, Foxhall turned and threw to first, completing an easy double play that was brought about directly through the batter's perverseness in declining to follow the instructions of his captain.

CHAPTER II.

THE SCORE TIED.

Jack Nelson sprang up from the bench, his face pale, his eyes flashing with anger. Osgood had stopped abruptly on his way to first, realizing that the double play sent Oakdale back to the field, and turned to cross the diamond to his position at third base. Nelson met him near the pitcher's position.

"What do you mean, Osgood," he demanded hoarsely—"what do you mean by disobeying my order? I told you to sacrifice."

"But it was a fine chance to hit the ball out and make some runs," returned the disobedient player defensively. "Sacrificing with one man down didn't look like good baseball to me."

"It makes no difference how it looked to you; your place was to follow my instructions. Stone has been hitting Leach hard and safely, and,

with Grant on second, even a long single might have given us another score."

"I beg your pardon," said Osgood haughtily "but I played baseball before I ever saw Oakdale, and I know something."

"That will do," interrupted the wrathful captain. "I don't care how much baseball you know, you'll have to obey me if you play on this team, and you may as well understand that at once. You can see that you threw away a chance for a run by hitting into that double play."

Ned Osgood was not the sort of fellow to relish this style of talk even from the captain of his nine, and for a moment he was tempted to make a sarcastic rejoinder. Something prevented him from doing this, however, and he walked onward toward third, shrugging his shoulders. His manner was so irritating to Nelson that for the moment, even though Osgood had shown himself to be the best available man for the position he filled, Jack was tempted to bench him instantly. This temptation was put aside, but it

was followed by an immediate decision to stand no more foolishness from Osgood.

The alarm that had been awakened in the bosoms of the Wyndhamites by Grant's safe drive was dissipated in joy over the defensive work of the home team, which had prevented the Texan from advancing further. Boys and girls of Wyndham High cheered in concert and waved their banners, while the crowd of older sympathizers made a great uproar.

Like Nelson, Grant had been extremely annoyed by Osgood's pigheaded action, and the Oakdale pitcher was somewhat disturbed as he resumed his position on the firing line.

"Hard luck, Rod," said Stone, the somewhat taciturn catcher, as he buckled on the body protector.

"It wasn't luck," denied Grant; "it was mulish foolishness, nothing less."

Laughing and well satisfied, the Wyndham lads capered to their bench, where Leach, seeking for his bat, listened and nodded as Captain Baxter gave him a word of instruction.

"Don't try to kill that wild and woolly Texan's speed, Lefty," said Baxter. "He's burning 'em over like bullets, and we're swinging our heads off. Just try to meet 'em, that's all."

Grant's annoyance was made still further apparent when he opened with a weirdly wild heave over Stone's head that would have counted against him as a wild pitch had there been a runner on the sacks.

"Going up," shouted some one from the Wyndham bleachers; and, in an effort to rattle the pitcher, the crowd redoubled the racket it was making.

Seeing that the pitcher was unsteady, Stone began to fuss over his mask strap, which had suddenly become unsatisfactory and needed adjustment. The entire Oakdale team felt the tension of the moment, and Stone's subterfuge met their approval. On the other hand, it led their opponents to protest against the delay and urge the umpire to make them play.

Apparently getting the mask strap fixed at last, Ben resumed his position behind the pan and

squatted to signal between his knees. Rod shook his head, and the catcher changed the signal. Then Grant nodded and pitched.

Faithful to instructions, Leach took a short grip on his bat and brought it round quickly to meet the ball. There was a ring of wood against leather, and an instant later Nelson, flinging himself to one side, reached for the grounder. It struck his gloved hand and carromed off to the left. He went after it instantly, scooped it up and shot it to Crane at first, but it arrived a bare second too late.

The Wyndham crowd cheered as madly as if Leach had reached the initial sack on a clean hit instead of an error. Out in center field, Shultz laughed with the satisfaction of a player who, lacking whole-souled interest in his team, feels that his own bad work has been minimized by that of a teammate. In this case his satisfaction was made the greater by the fact that the minimizing error had been contributed by the chap who had criticized him a short time before.

Nelson stood still for an instant, then held up

his hand for the ball, which Crane threw to him. Turning, the captain made a signal, which caused Cooper to take his position on second. Tossing the sphere to Chipper, Jack walked into the diamond and spoke in a low tone to Grant.

"Don't let that rattle you, old man," he said. "I reckon we're both hot under the collar, and we'd better cool off a bit. Take your time with these chaps; they can't hit you."

"I'd like to punch Osgood's head!" growled the Texan.

"So would I, but that wouldn't help us win the game. Look out for a sacrifice now. They've found they can't steal on Stone."

"Play ball! play ball!" howled the crowd.

"Play ball," said the umpire sharply.

On first, Leach was seeking to add to the opposing twirler's unsteadiness by uproarious laughter and the repeated declaration: "We've got him going! We've got him going!"

Nelson was most deliberate about returning to his post, and not until he was there did he nod for Cooper to give Grant the ball. Like a flash

Rodney shot it to first, and the laughter of Leach was cut short by a gasp as he barely ducked under Crane's reaching hand.

"Almost gug-got him then!" shouted Springer from right field.

"Here's the head of the list," called a coacher, as Crispin squared himself in the batters' box. "Keep up the good work."

In order to make it difficult for Crispin to bunt, Grant put one over high and close—too high and too close. Crispin caught himself in his swing and then pretended that he had been hit on the shoulder; but the pretense was so palpably a fake that the umpire behind the pitcher, who chanced to be an Oakdale man, refused to let him take first. Naturally, the other umpire, who was in charge of the bases, said nothing, but somehow his manner seemed to denote that he disagreed on the decision. This led to a kick by the Wyndham captain, who dropped it quickly, however, when reminded by a fellow player that the delay was giving Oakdale a chance to steady down.

Again Grant attempted to put the ball over high and close, but he simply got it across the inside corner slightly below the batter's shoulders, and Crispin made a successful bunt that rolled along just inside the first base line. Jumping over the ball, the hitter sprinted hard for first.

Grant scooped up the rolling sphere and heard Nelson's sharp cry to put it to first. It whistled past Crispin's ear and spanked into Crane's mitt.

"Out at first," said the Wyndham umpire, with something like a touch of regret.

"Good work, Crispin," gleefully called Baxter, giving the player a slap on the shoulder. "That was a beauty bunt, old boy. Now we've got 'em where we want 'em."

Even as he spoke he signaled from his position on the coaching line for Foxhall to hit the ball out; and Foxhall was liable to do it if anybody could.

Grant worked carefully with this batter, meanwhile holding Crispin as close to first as possible. Nevertheless, Foxhall swung uselessly only once. The second time he whipped his bat round he con-

nected with the horsehide and sent the sphere skimming along the ground straight at Cooper.

Eager and anxious, Chipper booted it beautifully. Like a cat he chased it up and made a futile effort to get the hitter. The throw was a case of bad judgment as well as a wild heave, which even long-gearred Sile Crane could not reach.

So while Crane was chasing after the ball, Foxhall, who should have been out, romped on to second, and Leach scored amid a tremendous tumult.

Grinning broadly, Sam Cohen, Wyndham's heavy-hitting leftfielder, danced out to the plate, determined to keep things moving. Surely, it looked like Wyndham's opportunity, and, besides the desire to prevent the visitors from settling down, there was a legitimate excuse for the continued uproar of the home crowd. Although they well knew that Grant was little to blame for the turn of affairs, the Wyndham coaches were trying hard to "get him going" by pretending that it was his fault, and behind Rodney's back Fox-

hall capered on second, clapping his hands and making gestures intended to encourage the shrieking spectators.

Never in his life had Chipper Cooper been more chagrined and ashamed. His face beet-red, he begged Nelson to kick him.

"Get back to your position and play ball, Cooper," said the captain, as calmly as he could. "We've got to stop this foolishness right here. They mustn't make another run."

Grant's teeth were set and his under jaw looked grim and hard. He knew well enough that Cohen was especially dangerous at this stage of the game, for the nervy Hebrew was one of those rare batters who hit better in a pinch than at any other time, the necessity seeming always to prime him properly.

Trying Cohen out with a bender that went wide in hopes that in his eagerness he would be led to reach for it, Rodney delivered a ball. The next one was high and likewise wide, for Stone had seen Foxhall taking a dangerous lead off second and called for a pitch that would put him

in easy position to throw. Nelson, awake to precisely what was transpiring between the battery men, made a leap for the sack before the ball reached Stone's hands, and Ben lined it down with a wonderful short-arm throw, which saved time and yet was full of powder.

Only for the warning shouts of the wide-awake coaches, who had seemed to divine the move in advance, Foxhall might have been caught napping. As it was, he barely succeeded in sliding back to the sack, feet first, and the Wyndham umpire instantly spread his hands out, palm downward. Foxhall drew a breath of relief.

A moment later Baxter shouted:

"Got him in a hole, Cohen! Make him put 'em over now! Make him find the pan!"

Steady as a rock, Grant did put the next one over, and Cohen, "playing the game," let it pass for a called strike.

"He can't do it again!" cried Baxter. "Make 'em be good!"

Grant used a drop, starting the ball high so that it shot down past the batsman's shoulders

and across his chest. Even as the umpire called, "Strike two," the Oakdale players shouted a warning to Stone. It was needless, for Ben had seen Foxhall speeding along the line in a desperate and seemingly ill-advised attempt to purloin third. Craftily Cohen fell back a step to one side, as if to give the catcher room to throw, but with the real purpose of bothering him as much as possible without bringing, by interference, a penalty upon the runner. Possibly this was the reason why Stone threw high, forcing Osgood to reach to the full length of his arms in order to get the sphere. Almost invariably the Oakdale catcher put the ball straight and low into the hands of the baseman, so that the latter could tag a sliding runner quickly and easily; and had he been able to do this now, Foxhall doubtless could not have slid safely under Osgood, which, however, was precisely what he did succeed in doing.

"Who said we couldn't steal on old Stoney?" shouted Peltz from the coaching line back of

third. "Great work, Foxy, old man. You put that one across on him."

With only one local player gone and but a single run needed to tie the score, the tension of the moment was intense. No one realized the danger better than Grant, and when he pitched again he made another clever effort to "pull" Cohen; an effort that almost succeeded, for Sam caught himself just in time to prevent his bat from swinging across the plate.

"Ball three," came from the umpire.

"He's going to walk you, Cohen; he's afraid of you," came from Baxter.

It must be admitted that Grant had considered the advisability of handing Cohen a pass, but knowing Wolcott, the fellow who came next, was almost as dangerous a hitter, he had decided that such a piece of strategy would be ill advised. Taking into consideration the batter's ability to meet speed, Rod shook his head when Stone called for a straight one on the inside corner. Ben knew at once that the Texan wished

to try to strike Cohen out, and so he swiftly changed the signal.

Now Cohen had brains in his head and was also a good guesser. Moreover, he knew that Grant relied largely upon his remarkable drop when a strike-out was needed. And so it happened that, seeing Rod decline to follow the first signal, he was convinced that the pitcher would hand up one of those sharp dips.

Having guessed right, the batter judged the drop beautifully and hit it a tremendous smash. Away sailed the ball toward center field, some distance to the right of Shultz, who stretched his stout legs to get under it.

"He can't touch it!" was the cry.

Nevertheless, when Foxhall started off third, Peltz, defiant of coaching rules, sprang forward, grabbed him and yanked him back.

"Get on to that sack!" the little shortstop panted. "Get ready to run! You can score anyhow; you don't need a start."

Thus advised, Foxhall leaped back to the cushion, upon which he planted his left foot with the

right advanced, crouching, his hands clenched, his arms hooked the least bit, ready to get away like a sprinter starting from his mark.

Shultz made a splendid run, leaping into the air at the proper moment and thrusting out his bare right hand. The ball struck in that outshot hand and stuck there.

An instant before the catch was made Peltz shrieked, "Go," and Foxhall raced for the plate.

It was impossible to stop that run. Cohen's long sacrifice fly had tied the score, in spite of the strenuous and sensational one-handed catch in center field; and the crowd leaped and yelled, with arms up-flung and caps hurled into the air.

CHAPTER III.

BENCHED.

In moments like this the baseball fan of any age goes wild with frenzy; especially is this true of the enthusiastic schoolboy fan who has watched his team fight an uphill game and come neck-and-neck with a worthy and much-feared rival in one of the late innings of the contest. The youthful Wyndhamites shrieked until their faces were purple and their eyes bulging, flourishing their banners and frantically pounding one another over heads and shoulders. At the bench the players laughingly danced around Foxhall and then cheered Cohen as the latter came walking back from first, muttering to himself that the catch had been "a case of horseshoes, nothing less."

In the midst of this excitement Nelson ran up to Grant, whose face was pale, but grim and set as ever.

"You couldn't help it, Rod," said the Oakdale captain soothingly. "They won't get any more. The bases are clean now."

"But they've tied the score," growled the Texan. "That's the first time Cohen has touched one of my drops to-day."

"Hold them where they are, and we'll win it yet," declared Jack optimistically. "We didn't expect a walk-over with this bunch."

Wolcott's courage was high as he faced Rodney. Heedless of the uproar, the Texan burned the air with his speed, and Wolcott fouled.

"Strike one," called the umpire.

Another smoker followed with a slightly different twist, and this time the batter missed cleanly.

"That's two of them, old Maverick," called Stone, breathing on his smarting right hand. "Some speed, old man—some speed there."

Seemingly with precisely the same movement and snap, Rodney made the third pitch; but this time the ball lingered astonishingly on its way, as if held back by some subtle force, and, as a

result, the befooled batter struck too soon, not even fouling it. This gave the little bunch of loyal Oakdalers a chance to cheer.

"I don't suppose you're going to call me down for that one-handed catch, are you?" said Shultz insolently, as he came jogging to the bench.

Nelson shot him a look and turned away without answering. Not satisfied, the fielder turned to Cooper. "A man can usually tell whether he can reach the ball best with one hand or two," he declared loudly enough for the captain to hear. "I didn't make that muff intentionally."

Ben Stone walked out to the plate and watched Lefty Leach waste two benders, which led Springer stammeringly to prophesy that Leach, being afraid, would give the stocky catcher a pass. The next one, however, was over the outside corner and precisely where Ben wanted it, whereupon he smashed a terrific drive over second and took two sacks on it amid further enthusiasm by Oakdale.

Nelson could not refrain from calling Osgood's attention to the fact that this hit would have

given the visitors a score had his instructions regarding sacrificing been obeyed.

"Perhaps you're right," admitted Ned in his blandly polite and tantalizing manner; "but it's no dead sure thing that Stone would have made just that kind of a hit in the other inning. Anyway, we ought to get some runs now."

Sile Crane ambled awkwardly forth to the plate and hit into the diamond the first ball pitched, giving Stone, who had a good start, plenty of time to reach third, for Foxhall juggled the grounder a moment. Realizing he could not stop Ben, Foxhall snapped the sphere to first in time to get the lanky batter.

"The squeeze, Cooper," hissed Nelson in Chipper's ear, as the little shortstop rose from the bench. At the same time Jack assumed a pose that told Stone what was to be tried.

Ready to play his part, Ben crept off third, intending to dash for the plate and rely upon Cooper to hit the ball into the diamond somewhere.

Leach placed himself in position, nodded in

response to his catcher's signal, hunched his left shoulder a bit, and, whirling like a flash, threw to third. Stone had started forward with that shoulder movement by the pitcher, and was caught off the sack. Instantly, even as he sought to get back without being touched, he called for judgment on a balk.

The umpires had changed positions, and now the Wyndham man was behind the pitcher. In response to that demand for a decision on Leach's movement he grimly shook his head.

"It was a balk—a plain, cold balk," cried Nelson, on his feet.

"No balk," denied the umpire, still shaking his head.

"In that case," said the other umpire slowly, "Stone is out at third."

Nelson ran into the diamond and confronted the Wyndham man. "It was as rank a balk as I ever saw," he asserted hotly. "What kind of a deal are you trying to give us?"

"I saw no balk, and I was looking at the

pitcher," returned the umpire. "Get back to your bench."

Nelson argued in vain, while the crowd made the air ring with hoots and cat-calls. Presently the umpire threatened to pull his watch and forfeit the game, whereupon the disgusted and angry Oakdale captain walked slowly back to the bench.

"You shouldn't let him get away with it," said Osgood. "It was a balk all right."

"Why didn't our man call Stone safe?" rasped Grant.

"Ben was caught off the sack by five feet," said Nelson. "Two wrongs don't make a right. But it's hard medicine to swallow."

Thus far Chipper Cooper had not made a hit; but now, as if he, too, was fired with resentment by the injustice of the decision, he landed on the second ball pitched to him and drove it out for a clean single.

"G-g-good bub-bub-boy, Chipper!" shouted Springer. "It's a wonder he didn't call it a fuf-foul, though."

Sleuth Piper, solemn and savage, took his place

at the plate, grabbing his bat and shaking it as if he meant to make a dent in the ball as surely as Leach got it within reach. Not once did he swing, however, and the left-handed twirler looked disgusted when he had presently handed up the fourth ball in succession and thus given one of the weak batters of the visiting nine a pass.

"Get the next man, Lefty," urged Baxter. "He's fruit for you."

With the head of the list following Springer, the Oakdale boys hoped for the best; but Phil put up a dead easy infield fly that was smothered, and the visitors had lost another splendid opportunity.

Never in his life had Grant pitched better than he did in the last of the eighth. Only three batters faced him, and two of these fanned, the third putting up a foul which Stone took care of with ease.

"Steady, fellows," cautioned Baxter, as his men started for the field. "We've only got to

hold them. Old Grant can't keep that steam up. We'll get to him."

Leach started the ninth as if he meant to duplicate the last turn of the Texan, fanning Captain Nelson with apparent ease.

Once more Rod Grant came to bat, and once more, with his pet club in his hands, he out-guessed the southpaw twirler, banging a clean single into center.

At Osgood's elbow Nelson quickly said:

"Sacrifice him to second. That will give him a possible chance to score if Shultz hits safe."

Osgood made no retort. He saw Grant looking toward the bench and placing himself in position to get away swiftly on the bunt. At the plate, he beheld the first ball pitched to him apparently coming over just where he wanted it, and instantly he felt that he could hit it out safely. Furthermore, he had not changed in his conviction that it was bad policy to sacrifice with one man down, even though the next two hitters were supposed to be the best stickers on the team, and one of them, Shultz, was his especial chum.

Therefore he swung on the ball and met it. Instead of a drive, it proved to be a grounder that went clipping over the skin diamond straight into the hands of Peltz. Like a flash Peltz snapped it to Foxhall, who had leaped on to second, and, turning, Foxhall lined the sphere to first, again completing a fast double play.

Nelson was on his pins, and he intercepted Osgood as the latter, without looking toward him, attempted to pass on the way to his position at third.

"Go to the bench," said Jack, his voice hoarse and husky. "You're out of the game, Osgood."

"I beg your pardon," said Osgood. "What did you say, sir?"

"I said you're out of the game. I won't stand for such rank disobedience."

"Oh, very well," said Osgood, coolly turning toward the bench. "You're the autocrat—at present."

"What's the matter?" demanded Shultz, running up. "What's the trouble, Ned?"

"Nothing," was the reply, "only I'm benched because I didn't make a safe hit."

"If he benches you I'll quit myself," threatened Shultz.

"You won't quit," said Nelson instantly. "You're fired. The bench for you, too. Get off the field."

"Well, wouldn't that choke you!" gulped Shultz, astonished to have his bluff called so promptly. "How will he fill both our places?"

Nelson showed them in a moment by placing Roy Hooker, one of the spare pitchers, at third, and sending Chub Tuttle to fill center field.

Osgood and Shultz retired to the bench, where they sat talking, the latter showing by his manner that he was thoroughly enraged against his captain, while his friend, more politic and suave, accepted the situation with pretended indifference and disdain.

Although the team had been weakened by the removal of these two players, for the substitutes surely could not fill their positions with an equal amount of skill, Grant betrayed no sign of weak-

ening himself. Peltz and Leach were retired by the strike-out route, and even Crispin's best performance was a weak grounder on which he perished in a hopeless dash to first.

The tenth inning opened with Tuttle at bat. Chub had never been a hitter, but he did succeed in rolling a weak one to Leach, who threw him out.

"Now, Stoney," implored Cooper, as the catcher again came up, "you've got to do it. He's been a mark for you. One run is all that we need to take this game. Lace it out."

Leach was very glad that the bases were empty. Even under those circumstances he began as if he meant to pass this dangerous slugger. After pitching two balls, however, he got one across, and Ben fouled it. Then came another ball, which was followed by a high, speedy shoot.

Stone smashed the horsehide again, bringing every spectator up standing. It was a splendid drive, but Cohen took it on the run and held fast to it.

"Ah-ha! Oh-ho!" whooped Baxter joyously.

"Old Eat-'em-alive is finished. Now you have things your own way, Lefty."

Although Shultz was grinning as Stone came walking back, Osgood politely declined to smile.

Sile Crane sighed as he picked up his bat.

"By Jinks!" he muttered. "I'd sartainly like to make one more hit off that feller. I don't seem able to touch him no more." After which he walked to the plate and swung at the first ball pitched with all the strength of his long, sinewy arms.

There was a tremendous ringing crack, and the ball went sailing away, away, far over the center-fielder's head. The little Oakdale crowd screamed like lunatics, but the Wyndhamites were distressingly silent as the long-gearred lad raced over first, second, third, and on to the plate, which he reached ere the ball could be returned to the diamond.

CHAPTER IV.

WYNDHAM'S LAST DESPERATE STAND.

Charley Shultz sneered openly, with his full red upper lip curved high and exposing his broad teeth, as the delighted Oakdale players congratulated their comrade who had made that opportune home-run drive.

"Look a' that gangling country jay," he muttered in Osgood's ear. "See him grin like a baboon. See him distend his flat chest. Probably he thinks himself a Lajoie or a Wagner."

"Hush, Charley!" cautioned Osgood gently. "Don't be too open in your feelings; it's bad policy. Besides, I've got Crane on the string. He's astride the fence now, and doesn't know which way he's going to fall."

"Oh, all right," returned Shultz; "but I don't see what use you can have for him. He hasn't any money, and his influence doesn't amount to much."

"Even the support of the weakest chap may prove of some value when the break comes."

"After to-day you ought to force things in a hurry. I hope you're not going to stand for the rotten deal that swell-head Nelson has handed out to us."

"Have patience, old man—have patience," soothed Osgood. "I'll strike when the iron is hot. When possible, a good general always avoids going into an engagement before his plans are properly prepared and his forces strengthened to the full limit."

The fact that these two disgruntled fellows took no part in the rejoicing of their team seemed to be overlooked at the time; for this was a game in which a run in the tenth inning was of tremendous importance, and, taking into consideration the recent course of the contest, almost an assurance of victory. A triumph over the always formidable Wyndhamites in the season's first meeting between the two teams would give Oakdale a much desired advantage in the High School League.

"Oh, why can't I do something like that?" cried Cooper. "It makes my solitary little tap look like ten below zero, and I always get cold feet in that sort of weather."

Nevertheless, he faced Lefty Leach like a chap exuding confidence from every pore. Leach was frowning and savage in his bearing, but Chipper returned the Wyndham pitcher's dark look with a cheerful smile, threatening to start the stitches in the horsehide if Lefty dared to put one over.

The thunderstruck and dismayed Wyndham crowd awoke from its benumbed condition and resumed cheering, although there was plainly a disheartened note in the volume of sound, something which the players themselves must have recognized. On the other hand, the Oakdale spectators were once more jubilant with restored confidence in their team and the conviction that Crane's wonderful wallop had practically decided the result.

Despite Cooper's aggressive attitude of assurance, Leach unhesitatingly slanted the ball across

and continued to do so while the Oakdale short-stop rapped out foul after foul.

"You'll get him in a minute," encouraged Baxter. "He never was any good with the war-club."

Much to Cooper's sorrow, this prophecy came true, for Chipper finally hoisted a short one back of first for Turner, the baseman, to gather in.

"Only three more men, Grant," said Nelson. "Get them, and we hang up a scalp."

"I'll sure do it if it's in me," whispered the Texan to himself, as he made his way to the diamond.

Baxter rushed to the bench to have a few words with his players.

"Don't be too eager, fellows," he cautioned; "and still, don't let him sneak any good ones across. He's pitching for his life now, but he'll try to pull you all. If you can start us going, Foxy, we'll crawl out of this hole right here."

Making no retort, Foxhall stepped into the batters' box and watched the Oakdale pitcher make the situation more difficult for himself by failing to find the pan with the first two pitches.

An in-shoot followed, and, remembering Baxter's words, Foxhall picked it off the inside corner with a sharp swing that sent it grass-cutting ten feet inside of third.

Roy Hooker, who was filling Osgood's position, was not an infielder, and, although he leaped in front of the ball, he failed to keep his feet together, which allowed the humming sphere to go through him cleanly.

"Ha! Look a' that!" cried Shultz, giving Osgood a nudge. "That would never have happened if you'd been there."

"Don't make comparisons—don't," said Osgood quickly. "They are odious. He's going to stretch it into a double."

Sent onward by the coacher, Foxhall raced over the initial sack and stretched himself for second. It chanced, however, that Sleuth Piper was in position to back Hooker up, and, rushing forward, he took the ball on a favorable bound and threw it to second while still in his stride. It was one of the cleanest pieces of fielding, and perhaps the best throw, Piper had ever made in

his baseball career, for it came straight into the hands of Nelson, who disregarded the dangerous spikes of the sliding runner and tagged Foxhall so cleanly and effectively that the locals had not the slightest excuse for a kick on the decision of "out."

"Well, wouldn't that cramp you!" muttered Shultz disgustedly. "Why in thunder did the man try to make a double of it?"

"Once more," said Osgood, "I must caution you not to show your feelings so plainly. Even if we're benched, we're still members of the team and——"

"I don't know whether *I* am or not," rasped the resentful Shultz. "I don't propose to play on any team where I'm handed a raw deal by a thing like Jack Nelson."

"Now look here," said his companion, "you'll stick on the team unless you're fired off it, for as members of the nine we'll have more pull with the bunch than otherwise. You're too brash, Charley. You haven't any policy or subtleness. Don't think for a minute that I'm not just as sore

as you, but as injured yet still loyal Oakdalers we can win more sympathy than by open rebellion."

"I s'pose you're right," admitted Shultz; "but I never could control myself the way you can."

That the Wyndham boys realized how desperate the situation was became manifest through an undisguised quarrel which now arose between Foxhall and two of his teammates who attempted to criticize him.

"What's the matter with you?" snapped the bitterly disappointed chap. "Peltz sent me down. Chew the rag with him if you're going to jump on any one. How'd I know that fielder was in position to back up and get the ball to second so soon?"

"Cut that out, all of you," interposed Baxter. "Stop fussing and play ball. This game isn't over yet."

"But it's pretty well over," cried Cooper gleefully. "It's all over but the shouting."

Cohen, who seemed never troubled by a weak heart, predicted that he would get a hit and

begged Wolcott to advance him with a duplicate. Then the nervy young Hebrew stood forth and demonstrated that he had a good eye by refusing to bite at the coaxers and compelling Grant to put the pill across. When this was done, he hit it hard and fair, the resounding crack bringing a shout from the Wyndham crowd.

That shout was abruptly cut short when Cooper shot into the air and pulled Cohen's drive down with one hand. From the opposite side of the field burst the sudden relieved shrieks of the Oakdalers, whose hearts had been choking them an instant before.

"Keep quiet, Charley," said Osgood, placing a hand on his friend's knee. "It looks like it's really all over. Take your cue from me and pretend you're happy."

"You're asking just a bit too much, Ned," said Shultz huskily. "You know I'm a poor bluffer in any kind of a game."

"But you're usually lucky, just the same; I've seen you hold some great cards."

"Some catch, Chipper—some catch," Grant

was saying happily. "You raked the clouds for that one."

"I had to do something to make up for my last raw play," returned the beaming little chap.

Nelson was laughing. "We're backing you up now, Rodney, old boy. That kind of support ought to give you courage to take a fall out of Wolcott."

To tell the truth, although he made a pretense of being undismayed and confident, there was really little hope left in Wolcott's heart. Nevertheless, it was always Wyndham's way to play a game out without let-up, and the batter showed that he was trying for a hit by fouling the ball several times. Presently, however, the Texan deceived him with one of his most effective drops, and Wolcott's fruitless slice at the air brought the game to an end with the score 4 to 3 in Oakdale's favor.

CHAPTER V.

THE DIPLOMACY OF OSGOOD.

Shultz sullenly watched his teammates giving the losers a complimentary cheer; he could not take his cue from Osgood and join with the slightest pretense of rejoicing in this cheering. And when the happy players gathered up their trappings and started for the adjacent academy, where in the basement gymnasium the Wyndhamites had given them a room in which to change their clothes, Shultz trailed along behind, listening with persistent bitterness to the chattering fellows who were still rejoicing over the result.

"Oh, Craney!" cried Cooper, as he playfully banged Sile with an open hand. "That measly little tap of yours in the last round was certainly a soporific wallop."

"Here, yeou better let Sleuth slaughter the lan-

guage that fashion," grinned Crane. "Soporific! What's it mean, anyhaow?"

"Why, soothing, sleep-producing; it's what a prize-fighter hands his antagonist when he gives him a two-ton jolt on the point of the jaw. It put Wyndham down and out, all right."

"Oh, that didn't end the game by a long shot. If old Texas hadn't pitched some in the last half——"

"Great centipedes!" interrupted Grant. "If you fellows hadn't given me Big League support they'd corralled the game after all. The way you raked down Cohen's drive was sure some playing. And that little turn by Piper plugged their promising start right handsomely."

"I was frightened when Hooker let Foxhall's grounder get through him," declared Ned Osgood; "but Sleuth was right on the job. It was a splendid victory."

Jack Nelson shot the speaker a quizzical glance, but said nothing.

In the gymnasium they continued to discuss the game while peeling off their soiled uniforms

and getting into the heavy clothes which would be so necessary to their comfort on the long homeward drive; and, unable to keep still, Shultz cut in with an occasional sarcastic remark. For a time no one seemed to notice him, but suddenly Grant, unable to hold himself longer in restraint, turned on the disgruntled fellow.

"Quit your beefing," he exclaimed. "Why don't you try to follow Osgood's trail and make a pretense of being decent, whether you feel that way or not?"

The blood which suffused Shultz's face turned it almost purple, and he glared at the Texan as if he longed to seize the fellow by the throat and smash his head against the wall.

"I've got a right to open my mouth," he snarled, "and I propose to say what I please, regardless of any common, cow-punching——"

They would have been at it in a twinkling had not Nelson promptly leaped between them.

"Stop, Grant! Hold up!" he cried, seizing the pitcher, whose face was beginning to take on that awesome and terrible look which indicated

that his fiery temper was mastering him. "Don't start a scrap. It will be bad—bad business."

"I certainly won't allow anybody to shoot off his mouth at me that fashion," said Rodney, his voice vibrant with the passion he could scarcely restrain. "He's been sneering and hollering like the sorehead he is, and it's sure getting too much for me."

"It's my affair, if it's anybody's," asserted the captain. "I'm the one's he's sore on."

"And only for a lucky piece of work by Piper, you'd lost the game by putting Hooker in Osgood's place," said Shultz. "Just because he disagreed with you about sacrificing when he got the kind of a ball he knew he ought to hit out, you show your authority by benching him. Sacrificing in such a game, with one man down and a good hitter at bat, would be laughed at by——"

"That will do for you," Nelson cut him short. "No man on the team can talk to me this way, much less a new player like you. If you and Osgood came to Oakdale with the idea that you're

going to run the nine or ruin it, you may as well get that out of your noddles right away."

By this time Osgood had his friend by the arm.

"Cool down, Charley," he advised in his most pacifying manner. "You're giving a wrong impression by letting yourself get excited. I'm sure we were both just as eager to help win that game as any one. In fact, I will assert that it was my eagerness which led me to try for a hit when Leach put the ball over just where I like 'em best. It's true it seemed to me we'd be weakening ourselves by a sacrifice with one man down, but still, I meant to follow instructions when I went to the plate. It was only when I saw that ball coming across the pan so nicely that I forgot everything and tried to land on it for a safe drive. Even though in that moment I was led to forget instructions, I must insist that my heart was right. I've played the game ever since I was old enough to toss a ten-cent ball, and I learned something of its fine points at Hadden Hall. I'm not blaming Captain Nelson if his ideas and mine are not fully in accord, for base-

ball down here in this country can scarcely be as advanced as it is——”

At this point Nelson suddenly threw back his head and laughed, although perhaps it was not a laugh of simple amusement.

“That has been your pose ever since you came to Oakdale,” he said. “Your pity for us poor, ignorant countrymen is wholly appreciated, Osgood. It may be that we’re very shortsighted in failing to perceive the splendid opportunity we have for learning something about real baseball from you and Shultz, but it seems that you might find a more delicate and less egotistical method of opening our sleepy eyes.”

For a single breathless moment it seemed that Osgood was on the verge of permitting this sarcasm to lead him into a touch of temper, at least; but he was crafty and far too clever not to realize that such a thing would be likely to put him at a disadvantage in the eyes of some members of the team whom he had reasons to think were inclined to sympathize with him.

“I didn’t come to Oakdale to teach baseball or

anything else," he asserted. "I think I've stated before this that Oakdale Academy was a school of my mother's choice, not mine, and mothers who are fearful of the temptations which their sons may encounter in large and really efficient schools sometimes have peculiar ideas."

"Fathers, too," put in Shultz, with a curl of his red lips. "My old man was determined that I should get my preparatory education far from the evil influences of the really wide-awake world, and so he buried me in a forsaken graveyard."

"Too bad abaout yeou poor fellers," Sile Crane could not refrain from observing.

"I enjoy baseball," Osgood hastily went on. "I love the game. I was glad when it seemed assured that I'd have a chance to play on the academy nine. However, I scarcely fancied it would be considered a fault or a detriment that I happened to know something about the game as it's played to-day not only in big schools and colleges, but in big leagues. I've never missed an opportunity of seeing a Big League game and trying to wise up on the methods of the players.

I'd like to see Oakdale win out this season, and my interest in our success is so great that if I thought for a moment I would produce discord and disaffection on the team I'd voluntarily withdraw."

This assertion was made with an air of earnestness and sincerity, but the fellow had spoken craftily, with the design of spiking Nelson's guns, being certain that the captain suspected him of the very purpose which he so ardently disclaimed. Shultz, who knew his friend's secret motives better than any one else, really found it difficult to suppress a grin, while inwardly he was telling himself that Osgood certainly was a "slick duck." Why, Nelson was not only flanked, but his line of defense was cut off completely!

In a vague way the captain seemed to feel something of this, but still his quick perception told him that to a large extent Osgood had created a favorable impression, which would only be increased were his motives doubted.

"Well, that's all right," said Jack, a bit bluffly. "That's all we can ask of any chap. You've both

shown that you can play baseball, and if you show a willingness to respect the wishes of your captain that should be sufficient. We want players loyal to the team and to the school."

Right here Shultz made another break. "The school!" he laughed. "We'll be loyal to the team all right if we're given a show, but you must know that the school is almost a joke. It's taught by a dead one, with a lot of decayed back numbers as directors. Right here at Wyndham they have got a professor who's alive and who takes interest in some things besides books. Old Prof. Richardson has outlived his usefulness as a teacher. He's let the times pass on and leave him about thirty years behind. Who ever saw him at a baseball game, or any similar sport? The Wyndham prof was out here to-day watching the go, and he seemed as interested as any one. When Professor Richardson gets through with the day's session he toddles home to dressing-gown, slippers and tea. How a school with such a head can stand as well in athletics as Oakdale does certainly gets me."

"It's true," admitted Nelson, "that Professor Richardson has never taken any real genuine interest in outdoor sports, but he's a good principal and does his work well in the class room. His health isn't always the best. Everyone who knows him well respects him, at least, and I'm sorry to hear you say what you have, Shultz."

"I've simply stated a fact. Some day Oakdale will wake up to it, too, and the old man will lose his job. Some day before long you'll see a younger, more up-to-date principal filling his shoes. It will be a mighty good thing if that time comes soon."

"Let's not discuss that," interposed Osgood. "Whether Professor Richardson is efficient or not has nothing to do with the matter that threatened to produce a disturbance and some hard feelings on the team. That business is all settled now, and I think we understand that we're a nine united and anxious to do our best to win the championship. Come, fellows, let's forget it all. I'm going to."

This magnanimity had its effect, and, as they completed dressing for the jaunt home, the boys were again chattering and jesting, as if no threatening cloud had risen.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SUSPICIONS OF SLEUTH.

Osgood's manner during the tedious homeward jaunt would not have led any one unaware of what had taken place to fancy that there had been the slightest unpleasantness. He was polite and affable to every one upon the buckboard, and when the boys sang, as they did once or twice, his fine baritone voice was sufficient to command admiration and applause.

This fellow had entered Oakdale Academy in the midst of the term of the previous autumn, and had maintained for a time a certain reserve which prevented his schoolmates from seeking to pry into his personal affairs. It was some time, indeed, before the naturally curious boys learned from him that he was a native of New York, but that, on account of his mother's health, his parents had removed to California some years

before, where his father had suddenly passed away from an attack of heart disease. Of this bereavement he continued to be disinclined to say much, and it was noticeable that while he seemed distinctly proud of his mother, his father was never mentioned in that manner.

Nevertheless, Edwin Osgood took pains to impress upon his associates that there was genuine blue blood in his veins, and his claim was that he was upon his mother's side a direct descendant of Lord Robert Percival, Earl of Harcourt. Little by little at various times he let drop a few words which, pieced together, told of the banishing of a younger son of Lord Percival, who had brought upon his head the displeasure of the old Earl through his wild and wayward ways. This younger son had come to America, where he married, and Ned asserted that he was of the third generation in this country.

All this was apparently dragged reluctantly from his lips, and he even made some pretense of disdain for ancestry, although his stationery bore a crest, and those chaps who were favored

by invitations to his rooms stated that they had seen various portraits of Osgood's noble forebears.

Unlike other students at Oakdale who came from out of town, Ned did not simply room or board; he lived in the home of a widow by the name of Mrs. Chester, who had been induced to take him in through what was said to be a surprisingly liberal money consideration. In Mrs. Chester's house he had a sitting-room and a bedroom with an adjacent bath, and it was said that the widow, perhaps a bit impressed by having such a young swell in her home, permitted him to do about as he pleased in his rooms.

Now a fellow like this might through snobbery easily make himself unpopular in a country school, but Osgood's seeming whole-souled, manly boyishness, combined with an unusual knack at all-round sports and baseball in particular, had overcome the prejudice of many chaps who were inclined at the outset to regard him with disfavor. His staunchest friend, however, was Charley Shultz, with whom he had taken up al-

most immediately, and who seemed so remarkably different from him in every way that wonderment over their chumminess was justified. Shultz was rough and brusque and not infrequently positively boorish; furthermore, he was something of a bully, although, finding this bent disapproved by Osgood, he plainly sought to hold the inclination in check.

Among the village girls Ned was greatly admired, but with the boys a strong point in his favor was the fact that, although always pleasant and polite, he rarely attempted to play the gallant. He seemed to prefer fellows of his own age and with similar tastes in sports to the prettiest girl of the village or the school, and, although some of the misses were miffed over this, he rarely wasted time in their company.

Another point in his favor was the fact that, although he was known to have a pocket full of spending money and sometimes spent it generously on his companions, he managed to avoid patronism, and did not make the fellow less supplied with coin feel small or mean on that ac-

count. In short, he was generally sized up as "a jolly good fellow," and, although they had not ventured to say as much, several members of the nine had thought that Nelson was rather too hasty and harsh in sending Osgood to the bench for his disregard of orders. Besides Jack Nelson, Rodney Grant and Ben Stone were almost the only ones who had not fallen powerfully beneath the spell of Osgood's personality.

During the most of the homeward trip Shultz sat silent on a seat which also held Turtle and Piper. Once or twice he had a few words to say, and he endeavored in saying them to give the impression that he, like Ned, had dismissed the incident of the game which had so nearly led to a personal encounter in the Wyndham gymnasium. But Shultz was no diplomat; subterfuge to him was a most difficult thing.

The result of the game had been telephoned to Oakdale, and the boys were welcomed with cheers as the buckboard rolled up the main street toward Hyde's livery stable. At the stable they piled out with their bats and bags, shivering

a little from the raw cold of the spring evening, which had crept into their bones in spite of overcoats.

At the door of the stable Osgood paused a moment, and, Springer, Hooker and Cooper joining him, he was heard to say:

"See you later, fellows. Don't forget. So long. I'm hungry as a bear, and I won't do a thing to Mrs. Chester's grub to-night." Carrying the bag that contained his uniform and mitt, he swung off with a vigorous, buoyant stride, whistling cheerfully.

A few low words passed between the trio left behind, after which they dispersed in starting for their various homes.

Jack Nelson was not the only one to perceive something mysterious in the action of these fellows; Sleuth Piper's eyes and ears were wide open. When Shultz had likewise departed Nelson spoke to Grant.

"I don't suppose it's any of my business, but I'd really like to know what's in the wind. Those fellows are up to something."

"I reckon so," nodded Rodney; "but I opine it's no concern of mine."

Both were startled as Piper noiselessly appeared beside them.

"There are things going on in this town," said Sleuth, his voice discreetly lowered, "of which the general public is wholly unaware."

"Hello!" laughed Rodney, lifting his eyebrows. "The great detective is on the job. I judge you have inside information, Pipe?"

"Very little," answered Sleuth; "but if I set out to get it I'll not be balked. Once I take up a case worthy of my attention, I am relentless as Fate."

"Do you have an idea this matter is a case worthy of your attention?" asked Nelson, winking slyly at Grant.

"That I can't answer," confessed Sleuth; "but it's my theory that persons whose movements are secretive and mysterious deserve to be watched. Possibly I can tell you one little fact of which you are unaware."

"Let flicker," invited Jack. "We're listening, all agog."

"For some little time," said Sleuth, in answer to this invitation, "certain fellows have been meeting regularly every Saturday night in the rooms of Ned Osgood."

"Is that all?" exclaimed Grant, disappointed. "Why, I suppose, as Osgood happens to be such a popular chap, they merely drop in on him for a social call."

"Is there any reason why a fellow who is merely making a social call should shroud his movements in secrecy?" questioned Sleuth instantly. "If you were going to drop round to see Osgood for a little pleasant chat of a Saturday evening would you take pains to prevent the fact from becoming known? Or would you, if meeting a friend on your way, openly and frankly tell him where you were going?"

"I don't opine I'd be covering up my tracks any whatever."

"Not unless it was to be something more than a mere social call," nodded Sleuth decisively. "By

apparent chance it has happened that I have met on different occasions two or three of these fellows who were on their way to call upon Osgood, and when I asked them where they were going they either lied or begged the question. Ha! Now you perceive that there must be some hidden motive for this secrecy. A man who takes extreme pains to conceal his motives should be watched."

"There's certain some logic in that," admitted the Texan; "but I'll allow I don't see what those fellows could be up to that would concern anybody but themselves."

Nelson, however, was thoughtful, frowning the least bit.

"It may not concern any one else," he said presently, "and, then again, it may. It may be my fault, but I can't quite trust Osgood. I'll admit that he acted pretty decent in practically acknowledging that he was wrong to-day; but all the time I couldn't help feeling that he was playing policy, while thoroughly satisfied that he had been in the right and that I was a chump

to call for the sacrifice. As a matter between us three, there's a feeling of dissension on the team as well as in the school, and I'm sure that Osgood and Shultz are behind it. When I benched Osgood it wouldn't have surprised me in the least if some of the players besides Shultz had made an objection. He has got a grip on them, and they think he knows more baseball than I or any of the old players. I've seen them imitating his methods and his style of play. When a ball team loses confidence in the judgment of its captain, that team soon gets into a bad way."

"I didn't like the talk Shultz made about Prof. Richardson," said Grant. "The old boy may not take a natural modern interest in athletics, but you sure hit the nail on the head, Nelson, when you said that he does his work well in the class room and therefore makes a good principal. But I suppose I'd likely object to almost anything coming from Shultz. There's something about that fellow that certain rubs my fur the wrong way."

"He's irritating," agreed Jack; "but I can't

help thinking that Osgood is the more dangerous man. If there's trouble, you'll find that he will really be the leader."

"Oh, I don't judge there will really be any trouble," said Rodney optimistically. "If there was any brewing, I think you nipped it in the bud, captain. I've got to hike home, or Aunt Priscilla will begin to worry; she always does if I'm late to meals. Good night."

Sleuth pulled at Nelson's sleeve. "Wait a minute," he requested in a low tone. "I've a powerful suspicion that you're right in thinking there's trouble brewing—there's something going on beneath the surface. I'm going to investigate. I'm going to take this matter up professionally. I'll pierce the dark depths of the plot. I'll lay it bare in all its heinous nakedness."

"Go as far as you like, Sleuth," smiled Nelson. "As far as I'm concerned you have free rein, but don't drag me into it in any way."

CHAPTER VII.

YOUNG SPORTS.

After shivering for more than half an hour beneath a tree across the street from Mrs. Chester's home, Sleuth Piper finally decided to make a move. Since seeking the hiding shelter of that tree he had seen four boys ascend the widow's steps, ring the bell and obtain admission. It was now some time since the last one had disappeared within the house, and Piper believed no more were to follow.

There was a light in Osgood's room on the second floor, but the shades were closely drawn at the windows. Sleuth would have given much had he been able to look through those windows, but being prevented from doing so, he had decided on a bold move.

Swiftly crossing the road, he softly mounted the steps and hastily gave a single ring at the

bell. After a few moments the summons was answered by a maid, and the boy boldly entered the moment the door swung open.

"I'm to see Osgood," he said in a low tone. "I'm a little late. I presume the other fellows are ahead of me?"

"Mr. Osgood has several friends with him in his room," said the girl. "He's expecting you, isn't he?"

"Why, sure," returned Piper, although even in his "professional capacity" his conscience was troubled by the falsehood, which surely was something quite surprising in a detective.

By the muffled hall light the boy deliberately mounted the carpeted stairs. He heard the maid retire, and the sound of the door closing behind her was most gratifying to his ears.

There was little trouble in finding the door of Osgood's room, for from behind it came the subdued murmur of voices; and, listening, Piper heard at intervals a queer, soft, irregular clicking sound. But when he would have taken a peep through the keyhole, he was much disappointed

to find it either plugged or covered on the inside by something that baffled him.

"And that proves there's something queer going on," he whispered to himself. "They're not talking loud, either; they're keeping their voices down. A lot of fellows who get together and chat free and easy don't bother to talk that way. Wish I could hear something more."

After a time, growing desperate through the intensity of his increasing curiosity, he placed his hand gently on the knob of the door with his ear close to the panel, and, when the talk seemed to be a bit more general inside, he softly and slowly turned the knob.

The door was locked!

"That settles it," he mentally exclaimed. "There's something off color taking place here."

Still with the utmost caution, he permitted the spring slowly to force the catch back into place and removed his hand from the knob.

"There's just one thing to do now," he decided; "I've got to put on a bold front. It's the only play for me to make."

Lifting his hand, he knocked softly upon the door.

Immediately the hum of voices ceased, and after a little Sleuth fancied he heard some one whisper within the room.

He knocked again.

There was the sound of a person stirring, and the key turned in the lock. The door was opened the tiniest crack, and the voice of Osgood asked:

"Who is it? What's wanted?"

"Hello, Ned," called Sleuth, as he again grasped the knob and gave the door a push which flung it wide open. "Thought I'd come round for a little call this—— Why, you've got company! Excuse me."

The scene beheld by Piper's eyes caused them to grow unusually big and round. Within the room four boys remained seated around a table covered by a green cloth and lighted by a shaded suspension lamp. On that table were red, white and blue poker chips and some cards. In each fellow's hand were also the cards which he had held when play had been interrupted by Sleuth's

knock. The young gamesters looked somewhat startled, an expression which gave way to annoyance as they recognized the unwelcome caller.

"How the dickens did you get into the house?" exclaimed Osgood, in a manner that was, for him, unusually rude.

"Why," returned Sleuth instantly, "I just said I came round to make you a little call. But if I'm not welcome——"

"Old Pipe always has his nose into everything," laughed Chipper Cooper, one of the quartet at the table. "As long as he's here to call, bring him in and let him do his calling in the game."

The other three were Charley Shultz, Roy Hooker and Phil Springer. Shultz was scowling darkly and Hooker did not seem exactly pleased; but, like Cooper, Springer appeared to accept the situation good-naturedly.

"Bub-bub-bet he hasn't any coin with him," said Phil.

"Come in, Billy," invited Osgood. "Your unexpected appearance rather upset us. I thought

it might be Mrs. Chester or the maid, although we haven't been making any noise."

Piper was only too willing to accept the invitation. "You seem to be having a rather nice little game," he said, as he entered the room and Os-good relocked the door. "What's the limit?"

"Oh, we're just playing for amusement," assured the host. "It's nothing but penny-ante, with a ten-cent limit; just enough to make it interesting, you know. Do you play?"

Now one of Sleuth's weaknesses was cards, although his limited finances had never allowed him to play much for money. On this particular occasion, however, he happened to have in his pocket between two and three dollars, and, although he protested that he did not wish to butt in, he was more than willing to take a hand.

"It will get me on the inside with this bunch," he thought, "and if there's anything going on likely I'll catch a hint of it." So, to the surprise of Springer, he displayed his money, announcing that a ten-cent limit just suited him. A place

was made for him between Osgood and Springer, and he sat down at the table.

"We'll play this hand off," said Ned; "you can come in on the next. You're dealing, Cooper, and the pot is all level. I'll take three cards."

When that hand was played off Piper was given a dollar's worth of chips, together with some advice about maintaining silence concerning what was taking place in Osgood's room.

"The people in this village are so straightlaced and narrow," said Ned blandly, "that they would regard a little game of this sort, played merely for amusement, as we play it, as something bordering on the criminal. I'm sure you won't say a word about it, Piper."

"Better impress it on him harder than that," broke in Shultz offensively. "I'm not so sure."

"What do you take me for?" exclaimed Piper, with a touch of indignation. "I'm playing in this game, ain't I? Don't I know what folks around here are? Think I'd take a hand and then go out and shoot my face off?"

"He thinks," explained Osgood smoothly,

"that you might let a careless word drop among the fellows, not realizing that they would be likely to spread it. That's the way such things leak out; a fellow tells a friend under pledge of secrecy, and the friend tells another, and soon the secret is public property. We've taken pains to keep our little social gatherings very quiet."

Sleuth was quite aware of this, and their efforts to keep the matter quiet had awakened his natural suspicions and led him to that room.

"If I'm fool enough to blow about it after playing," said he, "any one or the whole of you will have the liberty to kick me good and hard. I think I can keep a secret when it's necessary."

"Sleuthy won't pup-pup-peach when he talks like that," said Springer. "Go on with the guggle."

Even though it seemed that he had done some bad guessing regarding the object of these quiet meetings in Osgood's rooms, Piper was, after the first throb of disappointment, rather glad of it; for, in a way, he was not very popular with the boys of Oakdale. At one time they had re-

garded his aspirations to become a detective with considerable amusement and had taken no little pleasure in joshing him. But of late his ability to uncover secrets and lay bare unpleasant facts concerning people with whom he came in contact had changed ridicule to a certain respect that was not wholly free from apprehension, causing him to be avoided.

In desiring companionship and friends, Piper was perfectly normal, and he had felt the coldness and slights of his fellows. Even Nelson, although regarding him valuable as an outfielder on the nine, had seemed to hold him at a distance. And so, when the turn of affairs and the singular behavior of the Osgood clique had seemed to point to scheming of some sort, Sleuth had not hesitated to make a bid for Jack's appreciation and gratitude by offering to discover and reveal what crookedness those chaps were planning.

It now appeared that he had been misled in his reasoning, for the secrecy of the boys who did not wish it generally known that they were

playing poker seemed, in the light of his discovery, perfectly natural and excusable.

As Ned skilfully rippled the cards, passed them to Cooper to cut and began dealing, Sleuth sat back on his chair, feeling that Fate had served him a good turn by getting him in with this little gathering of "sports." In these days nearly every fellow who really amounted to anything played cards, and it was surely far more interesting and shocking to play poker for pennies and dimes than to play it for matches or beans.

The room was rather warm, and both Shultz and Hooker were in their shirt-sleeves. Osgood wore a handsome house coat, with a collar, lapels and cuffs of purple plush. He was really a fine-looking chap, with his clean-cut face and his curly dark hair, a lock of which had strayed over his forehead. His hands were shapely and well formed, and a rich seal ring adorned the one that held the pack of cards. He had lighted a fresh cigarette. Shultz was smoking a cigar. A thin haze of blueish tobacco smoke floated like incense in the room.

Sleuth's swift appraising eyes had taken in the general appearance of that room as it could dimly be seen beyond the circle of light thrown over the table by the shaded hanging lamp. The furnishings were unusually excellent. Beneath his feet there was a thick carpet, soft and pleasant to the tread. There was a bookcase, a couch piled with cushions, and heavy portieres hung parted at the entrance to the adjoining bedroom. There were pictures on the walls and many photographs and knick-knacks belonging to Osgood upon the old-fashioned marble mantel, which had been hidden by a drapery. There were likewise banners, boxing-gloves, dumb-bells and a tennis-racket, disposed in various ways with a seeming carelessness that was really effective. Above the mantel hung some dim old portraits, which Sleuth immediately fancied must be the pictures of Osgood's titled ancestors.

"It's great," Piper thought. "It was a streak of luck that threw me in with this bunch. I'll be one of the gang after this."

He was aroused by the unpleasant voice of Shultz. "Come, wake up there, Vidocq; you haven't even anted. Shove out a white chip before you look at your cards."

CHAPTER VIII.

A HOT GAME.

As the game progressed Piper found himself losing steadily, and, what was most annoying, almost always he was beaten by Shultz, who himself was having bad luck and growling over it.

"Good thing for me you came into the game, Eagle Eye," said Shultz, laying down three Jacks, which topped Piper's three tens, and pulling in the chips. "These other sharks would have had me skinned to the bone by this time, only for you."

"Oh, my turn will come," declared Sleuth. "Give me another stack, Ned; that one's gone."

Osgood counted out another dollar's worth of chips and received Billy's money, which he deposited in the handsome chip case.

"You're the right sort after all, Sleuthy," he smiled. "You're a good loser. I realize that I haven't known you very well up to date."

"A man," said Piper loftily, "should take his losings without squealing."

"What do you mean by that?" snapped Shultz. "Are you knocking me?"

"Oh, no—no, not at all," Piper hastened to disclaim, aware that the fellow's bad fortune had aroused his belligerent nature.

"Because if you are," warned the ruffled gamester, "you'd better cut it out. I don't like it, and I won't stand for it."

"Oh, come, Charley," protested Osgood; "don't be so raw. I've seen you lose twice as much without growling."

"But I can't afford to lose to-night," was the retort. "I'm not very flush, and my old man thinks I'm blowing too much geldt, anyhow. That's the worst of having a close-fisted father. If I were in your shoes, Ned, I could stand a loss; but you're usually lucky, and you seldom quit behind the game."

"I've been having a streak, that's all," explained Osgood. "Luck runs that way occasion-

ally, but it usually turns in time. You fellows will get into me if you keep at it; you're sure to."

Hooker, likewise a loser, was keeping quiet and attending strictly to business. Unlike Shultz, he had not shown an inclination to force his luck, and doubtless he was waiting for his turn to come. Springer was also slightly behind, while Cooper was a small winner and therefore cheerful. The large pile of chips in front of Osgood denoted how the game was running.

With the suspicion that was characteristic of him, Piper had watched Osgood's playing closely to discover, if possible, whether or not Ned was winning legitimately, and he had arrived at the conclusion that there was nothing underhanded about it. Moreover, he was falling beneath the subtle spell of the young fellow's influence, which had been so strangely felt by others. Surely Ned was a whole-souled, genial chap that any one might be proud to claim as a friend; surely Nelson's suspicions were unfounded; not a word concerning baseball or the management of the

team had been spoken by any of these lads since Sleuth entered the room.

It was Hooker's turn to deal, and Roy tossed the pasteboards around. Piper, picking up his hand, was surprised and delighted to find it contained two pairs, aces up, and while he was secretly congratulating himself Osgood chipped.

"Come on, Mr. Good Loser," invited Shultz. "What are you going to do? Play faster. You make the game drag."

"Oh, I'll come in," said Sleuth, "and I think—I think I'll raise it."

"What do you know a-bub-bub-bout that!" exclaimed Springer. "Sleuth is plunging! Well, he can't frighten me; I'll peg along."

"Oh, let's make it interesting," said Shultz, tossing several chips into the middle of the board. "I'll boost it some more."

"Well, just to keep the pikers out," announced Hooker, "I'll give it another lift." And he did.

Cooper whistled. "That's about all I can do for my little measly ante," he remarked. "I've

got a small pair, but you chaps are making it too stiff for me. I'll drop out."

"Well, really," murmured Osgood, who had placed his cards face downward before him, "this begins to look like some poker game. I'll raise ten."

Piper swallowed and hesitated again. "What do you fellows think you're doing before the draw?" he inquired, with a touch of whimsicality. "I've just *got* to come in."

"You don't raise, eh?" questioned Shultz.

"No, I'm satisfied."

"I'm more than sus-satisfied," faltered Springer. "This is ruinous, but I suppose I'm partly to blame. I'll stay." He put in the amount needed to make himself level.

"Wait a minute, Hooker," said Shultz, perceiving that Roy was nervously fingering his chips. "It's my turn. You boosted me, and now I'm coming back with another limit raise."

Hooker found that he did not have enough chips, and so before betting he procured another

dollar's worth from Osgood. Then he raised Shultz.

"Oh, my!" sang Cooper. "I'm glad—I'm glad I staid out. It cost me only my little snow-white ante."

"H'm!" said Osgood, picking up his cards and glancing at them. "It seems that it's going to cost me more than that. There's a pair of Indians sitting over at the other side of the table. Well, fellows, I'm coming. I'm playing on your money, and you're welcome to take it away from me if you can."

At this point Piper, suddenly getting cold feet, dropped his two pairs. "I'm out," he said. "This sort of raising before the draw makes it too stiff for me."

Springer seemed to be perspiring freely, and his hands were not quite steady. "If it's a game of dud-dud-drive out," he said, "I'm going to stick to the last gug-gasp. Here I go. That makes me level."

Without saying a word, Shultz pushed out two blue chips.

"Do you raise again, Charley?" asked Osgood.

"Money talks," was the answer; "I put in two blue ones."

Hooker immediately raised again, whereupon Cooper chuckled still more gleefully over his cleverness in declining to be drawn in to defend his ante.

Osgood and Springer met the raise, and Shultz, after giving Hooker a slantwise glance, pushed out a final blue one and announced that he was "content."

"Very well," said Roy, picking up the pack. "Call for your cards."

"I'll take one," said Osgood.

Springer called for two, and, glancing over Phil's shoulder, Piper saw what he held.

"Why, he had me beat," thought Sleuth. "What can those other fellows hold?"

"How many do you want, Shultz?" asked Hooker.

"I'll play these," was the announcement.

"And I'll play mine without drawing," said

Roy, a touch of excitement creeping into his voice in spite of himself.

"Fine! fine!" laughed Osgood. "I had a fine chance, didn't I! You've got all of my chips that you'll get. I'm going to drop."

Springer swallowed once more. "Gee!" he breathed. "I cuc-can't drop; I've got to bet. I make it a white chip."

Shultz and Hooker did some betting that caused Springer's eyes to bulge.

"Great fish-hooks!" spluttered Phil. "You're a pup-pup-pair of robbers! Guess I've been fool enough. I'll lay down, too."

Shultz gave the player at his left a long, hard look. "I wonder if you're trying to bluff," he speculated.

"You'll find out presently," answered Roy.

"I ought to raise it again, but I'm going to call, and here's my hand. Can you beat it?"

"The pot is mine," said Hooker, spreading out his cards for all to see. "My cards are better." He reached out with both hands and raked the pile of chips toward him.

"Well, of all infernal luck!" snarled Shultz, flinging his cards fiercely down upon the table. "I thought my flush was good. It looks queer to me. You dealt the cards, Hooker."

Instantly Roy bridled. "What do you mean by that? I hope you don't insinuate that there was anything crooked about that deal? You cut."

"I know I did, but some fellows can——"

"Hold on, Charley," interrupted Osgood. "There's no one here that's going to play crooked. You haven't any right to think such a thing. I was watching, and I'll guarantee the deal was on the level."

"Oh, well, if you guarantee it——"

"You might apologize, Shultz," said Hooker, his voice hard and his face full of wrath.

"Now don't *you* fly off the handle, Roy, old fellow," entreated Osgood. "You see, Charley has had rotten luck, and he didn't really realize what he was saying. Come on, let's play the game like gentlemen. You didn't mean it, did you, Charley?"

"No, I guess I didn't," said Shultz, with ap-

parent reluctance. "I was half-joking. Forget it, Hooker."

"All right," agreed Roy readily enough. "That little pot sort of put me on my feet, and I'm not anxious to make a disturbance."

The tension of the moment relaxed somewhat, and the game was resumed, Cooper giving out the cards.

Piper was heartily glad that Hooker had won, and he felt that Roy was generous in his willingness to overlook Shultz's innuendo. He believed that an encounter between the two boys had been narrowly averted.

For some ten or fifteen minutes the game went on smoothly, nothing but small hands coming out, which produced little betting. Eventually, however, four "fighting hands" were dealt, and Piper and Springer sat back to watch the others, dropping their cards. There were a number of raises before the draw, in all of which Hooker and Shultz took part.

As if they felt that it was to be a serious

struggle, none of the players ventured to jest or make many comments.

Cooper remained in until the cards were drawn and then he dropped out.

Osgood hung on a while longer, although Shultz and Hooker kept raising alternately.

"You each took one card," said Ned at last, and, as you're running wild, I'm going to quit. Fight it out between you."

"Will you lend me some money, Ned?" asked Shultz.

"Sure," was the answer. "How much do you want?"

"Well, let me have two dollars' worth of chips. I may want more."

"You're pretty sure, aren't you?" said Hooker. "You must think you've got this pot cinched."

"My chips talk," said Shultz.

"Well, mine talk, too," snapped Roy.

They made several bets.

"You must have a big hand," muttered Hooker.

"Well, so have I."

"Oh, go as far as you like," sneered Shultz.

"You can bet all night if you wish, and I'll stick by as long as I can get any chips."

"What have you got?"

"Four bullets," announced Shultz triumphantly, as he lay his cards down, exposing four aces.

Hooker took a deep breath. "Well, that beats. I thought I had a pretty good hand. It's your pot, Shultz."

"Hold on! Hold on!" spluttered Piper, his eyes bulging. "Just wait a minute. There's something queer here."

Every one turned to him, Shultz savagely asking what was the matter.

"There's something queer about this," reiterated Sleuth. "Why, I—I'm sure I held an ace in my hand when I laid it down."

"Go on! you're dotty!" snarled Shultz. "There are only four aces in the pack."

But Sleuth had grabbed the discards, and, turning part of them face upwards, he exposed to view the fifth ace!

CHAPTER IX.

THE BLOW AND AFTERWARDS.

There was a moment of stunned and breathless silence as the young gamblers stared at the fifth ace thus exposed to view—the ace of spades. This silence was broken by Hooker, who, glaring at Shultz, suddenly snarled:

“You sneaking, cheating robber!”

With that cry, he leaped up, overturning his chair, and made a grab for Shultz’s throat. The latter had likewise risen, and with a sweep of his arm he brushed aside Hooker’s clawlike hand, at the same time driving his fist hard and straight at Roy’s face.

The blow landed with a sickening smack, and Hooker was hurled backward by the force of it, tripping over his upset chair. Both his arms were flung wide in an effort to save himself. His head struck with a thud against the marble man-

telpiece, the shock being sufficient to knock one or two bits of bric-a-brac to the floor. Beneath one end of the mantel he collapsed in a heap, with his shoulders against the wall, his head dropping limply over on one of them.

Springer, having failed to seize Shultz in time to check that blow, now grabbed him with both hands and clung fast, panting in his ear :

"For the lul-lul-love of goodness, what have you dud-done?"

With a hissing sound, Shultz drew his breath through his clenched teeth, exposed by his parted lips. His nostrils were dilated, and the rage of an aroused animal blazed in his eyes.

"A fight here!" fluttered Cooper. "Don't start a fight here!"

"Start one!" said Shultz hoarsely. "I didn't. He started it. He called me a cheat and a robber. I'll teach him to apply such words to me!"

"Keep Charley away," commanded Osgood, quickly kneeling beside the silent figure of the boy who had been struck down. "This is very bad business. Come, Hooker, brace up." But

when he sought to arouse the stricken youth, Hooker's body simply slid over sidewise with a little scraping sound against the wall, one arm rolling lifelessly across his breast to allow his knuckles to drop with a faint, soft knock upon the thick carpet.

"For the love of goodness!" repeated Springer in a horrified voice. "He lul-looks like a dud-dead one!"

Fiercely Shultz jerked away from Phil's restraining hands. "You don't have to hold me," he rasped. "What do you think I'd do, hit him again when he's down?"

Betraying the alarm he could not repress, Osgood made one more effort to arouse the limp fellow on the floor. Then he spoke swiftly, excitedly to the others.

"Somebody bring some water from the bathroom," he directed. "Roy's stunned. I'll loosen up his collar so he can breathe. Help me place him on his back. Bring the water quick!"

Trembling and sick at heart, Piper found his

way to the bathroom, drew a glass of water from the lavatory faucet, and hurried back with it.

Osgood and Springer were kneeling on either side of the prostrate lad, while Cooper, pale and agitated, stood looking on as if he could not bring himself to offer assistance or did not know what to do. Shultz, his jaws hard set, his breast heaving, stood at a little distance, watching.

"Give me the water, Piper," requested Osgood, plainly trying to maintain as much calmness as possible. "Hand Phil a book or magazine or something to fan him with. Some one open a window and let some of this smoke out. Make as little noise as you can. Perhaps they didn't hear him fall, and if we can bring him round all right, nobody must ever know what happened."

Hooker's tie had been removed and his collar and neckband unbuttoned. He lay quite still—horribly still, Piper thought. There was a bruise on his almost ghastly cheek where Shultz's fist had struck. His eyes were closed, and the lids did not even seem to flutter. In his white shirt-

sleeves, he seemed fearfully deathlike to the staring eyes of Billy Piper.

"Get that window open, I tell you!" ordered Osgood almost fiercely, as he began pouring water into the palm of his hand and bathing Hooker's temples. "Fan him, Springer."

"This is horrible!" Sleuth whispered to himself, as he opened a window. "I wish I'd never come here to-night."

After a few minutes Shultz began to betray concern. "Isn't he coming round?" he asked.

"If you've killed him," said Piper bitterly, "you won't be the only one to suffer for it. Nobody in this bunch ever will be able to hold his head up again in Oakdale."

"Oh, he'll come round all right. I didn't even hit him on the jaw. I don't see how he was knocked out so easy."

"It was the bump he got against the mantel," said Osgood, his dripping hand in Hooker's hair. "Here's the spot on his head. It's swollen almost as big as a hen's egg."

"Perhaps—perhaps his skull is fractured," muttered Piper.

"He brought it on himself," asserted Shultz in self-defense. "I don't know where that extra ace came from. I got all of mine honestly and squarely. He had no right to call me a cheat."

"I sus-saw his eyelids move," stammered Springer, still fanning. "He's coming round! He's breathing!"

"Yes, he's coming round, thank fortune!" said Osgood in great relief. "He ought to be all right in a few minutes."

Although these signs of reviving probably gave Shultz the most satisfaction, he now attempted to hide his feelings behind an air of sullen defiance and self-justification. Apparently, with the exception of Osgood, he was the calmest person in the room.

Presently Hooker's breast heaved and he gave a heavy sigh. Then his eyes opened.

"You're all right, old man," said Osgood. "You got a fierce old bump when you fell, but you'll be on your pins in a minute or two now."

Hooker looked at him strangely without speaking. After a little time they lifted Roy and placed him on the big leather-covered Morris chair, following which they stood around and tried to get him to say that he was feeling better. He continued to stare at them, one after another, in that same puzzled, bewildered way, and all their efforts to draw a word from him were fruitless. Once his eyes rested on Shultz, but in their depths there was no gleam of light in the slightest way different from that aroused by sight of the others.

"He's dazed," whispered Sleuth. "His mind is befogged."

"If we let him alone a few minutes he ought to come out of it," said Osgood. "Let's settle up. We can't play any more to-night."

"I'd like to know where that fuf-fifth ace came from," said Springer, as he turned all the aces over and looked at the backs of the cards. "They're alike, every one of 'em."

"I had two packs alike," explained Osgood.

"The extra ace must have gotten into this pack by accident."

"If we've been playing with it all the time," ventured Cooper timidly, "it's mighty funny we didn't discover it before."

"I'd like to know what you mean by that," growled Shultz, glaring at Chipper in a manner that made the little fellow draw back a bit. "I hope you don't insinuate——"

"I'm not insinuating anything," was the hasty disclaimer. "I just said it was funny, that's all."

"Fuf-funny is hardly the word," muttered Springer.

"I'm sure," said Osgood quickly, "that no one in this crowd would play a dishonest game. The cards got mixed, and I made up that pack myself. If anybody is to blame, I am. Count up your chips, fellows, and let's square things right away."

They did as directed, and he settled up with each of them, turning last to Hooker, who was behind the game. Counting the few chips left

to the unfortunate gamester, Osgood announced how many there were and offered their value in change to Roy, who, however, made no attempt to accept the coins.

"This is what's coming to you, Roy," said Ned. "Take it."

Hooker looked at him blankly. In Cooper's ear Piper whispered:

"He don't understand. What if he never comes out of it?"

"He will; he must," Chipper whispered back.

Ned slid the coins into Roy's pocket. "Now," he said, "I think this party had better break up. Somebody will have to see Hooker home, and I think the outside air will revive him. This affair must be kept strictly private. If any one breathes a word about it, he will brand himself as a—— Oh, but I know there's no need of saying such a thing, and I won't say it."

"You don't have to so far as I'm concerned," asserted Piper promptly. "Any one here would be a chump to tattle."

As Billy was the only one Osgood had feared,

Ned immediately showed his relief and satisfaction.

Hooker, still sitting supinely on the Morris chair, permitted them to readjust his collar and tie. When they lifted him to his feet he stood still while they actually pushed his arms into his heavy, reefer-like coat.

"There you are," said Osgood, slapping him on the back. "We're all mighty sorry it happened, Roy, but it was a mistake. As I provided the cards, I must shoulder the blame, if any one. You've been a game loser, old chap. Do you need some money? I'll lend you what you want."

"Queer," whispered Piper. "He doesn't seem to understand a word."

"I'm going," said Shultz suddenly. He removed from the doorknob his cap, which had been hanging there, and turned the key in the lock. As if he realized that something more was expected of him, he stopped and forced himself to turn until he could look back at them, though it was plainly with a great struggle that he did so. "Perhaps some of you fellows blame me,"

he flung at them. "If you do, just try to put yourselves in my place. Just try to think of yourselves as holding four aces, getting them squarely and fairly, and then being called a cheat and a robber. Perhaps I wouldn't have hit him if he hadn't tried to choke me."

"You're sorry it happened, aren't you, Charley?" said Osgood.

"I'm sorry—for your sake, anyhow; but I had to defend myself. Any other fellow would have done the same. Good night."

"Go out quietly," cautioned Ned, as Shultz was disappearing.

A few moments later they heard the departing fellow's footsteps coming up from the sidewalk.

"I'll let the rest of you out myself," said the host. "Don't talk as we go downstairs, and step quietly. Come on, Hooker."

He took Roy's arm, and, like guilty creatures, they stole out of the room and tiptoed down the stairs. It was necessary for Osgood to caution Hooker about descending in the dim light of the

hall lamp. At the outer door Ned made them wait while he took a look into the street.

"Nobody in sight," he announced in a low voice. "It's a good time to get away, fellows. Good night."

With muttered good nights they left the house and descended the steps, Springer having taken Hooker's arm. The air was damp and raw, and Piper's teeth chattered a little.

"Too bad our little pup-party busted up that way," muttered Phil; "but we were lucky to gug-gug-get out without anybody getting wise. Osgood's a fine chap, but if people knew about our playing in his rooms and this scrap to-night, they'd think him a regular pirate. Every old gossip in town would gug-gabble."

"What worries me most," ventured Cooper, "is about Hooker. Don't you feel all right now, Roy?"

"Perhaps he doesn't want to speak," whispered Piper. "S'pose he can get home all right?"

"Somebody had bub-better go with him," said Springer. "It's out of my way, but it's on your

road, Cooper. He's all right, only he doesn't talk. You see that he gets home, will you?"

"Yes, you see that he gets home, Chipper," urged Sleuth quickly. "I'll be late now. If the folks are still up, I'll have to make excuses. Good night, fellows." Turning into a side street, he set off at a run.

CHAPTER X.

THE LIE.

All night long, when he slept at all, Billy Piper played poker in his dreams, tossing and muttering and clawing at the bedding with his hands. But there were several protracted periods in those dark hours when he lay awake, thinking wretchedly of the almost tragic end of that game in Osgood's rooms. Never had he spent a worse night, and when the gray light of "the morning after" came stealing in at his bedroom window he prayed sincerely that he might never experience another like it.

Dawn brought him some relief from those distressing dreams and haunting visions of Hooker's prone, coatless figure and ghastly face; and, utterly worn out, he finally sank into a heavy doze. From this he was awakened by the sound of his mother's voice calling that it was time for him to get up if he wished any breakfast.

Her call had startled him and caused him to jerk himself partly upright in bed, where he remained propped upon his elbow as he answered that he would be down directly. This start had caused a throbbing in his temples, and after a bit he dropped back on the pillow, huskily muttering:

"What a night—what a horrible night!"

Lying there, he somewhat reluctantly reviewed the events of the previous evening, and as he thought it all over he regretted most heartily that curiosity and a desire to delve into the private doings of others had led him to become a member of that card party. For the first time he fully realized that the person who attempts to pry into the affairs of others without authority or a sufficiently good reason almost invariably brings upon himself no end of trouble and is sure in time to be regarded as a spy, a meddler and a nuisance. His eyes were opened at last to the real reason for the aversion with which his former friends and chums had seemed to regard him of late.

"This being a detective isn't half as fine as it

seems in stories," he muttered; "and, anyhow, I don't believe I was ever cut out for one. I've made a mistake. I'm too sensitive, too conscientious. My feelings are too easily stirred for me ever to make a success in that line. I'm going to quit it. Perhaps I can write stories, and I'm sure I'd like that better. They say an experienced crook often makes the most efficient detective, and I despise crooks. I'm done with the game."

That final word, although he had been thinking of something else, again brought vividly to his mental view a picture of the green-covered table bearing chips and cards and the young players sitting around it engaged in what they chose to call "a little friendly game." A few short hours before this had seemed to him all very fine and sporty, and it had attracted him as the magnet attracts the steel. Now, in the somber light of a dull spring Sabbath morning, the glamour was swept away, leaving only a bitter after-taste that was remorse.

They had said that they were playing penny

poker with a ten-cent limit simply to make the game interesting; but as he recalled their intentness upon the run of the play, the ill-concealed bitterness with which some of them accepted defeat, and their greedy, eager joy in winning, the truth smote him hard and convincingly. They had been gambling! The reason why they chose to play so small a game lay in the limited condition of their finances. Had they all possessed more money, penny-ante with a dime limit would have seemed tame and unsatisfactory, and therefore games of this sort were but the first steps to something bigger and worse.

"Ned Osgood started it here in this town," thought Piper. "He's naturally a fine fellow, and he doesn't realize what he's doing. I was not the only one who couldn't afford to play, putting aside the question of its being real gambling. In that whole bunch Osgood was the only one who really could afford it, and he was a winner."

At that time Sleuth did not know that in ninety-nine genuine gambling games out of a hundred the majority of the players cannot, from finan-

cial reasons alone, afford to participate. If not openly, they take part in such games with the secret hope that they will come forth winners, and one of the bad features of it all is the fact that their winnings, when made, seldom do them any real, substantial good; for money easily acquired is rarely rated at its real value and is almost as elusive as quicksilver. The winning gambler regards his gains as "velvet," forgetting his losses of yesterday and disregarding the assured certainty that he must lose again to-morrow or at some future time. He spends freely and foolishly, making doubly certain the time of deprivation and need which must come in future reverses.

The faint clatter of dishes, coming up from the dining-room, roused Sleuth from his unpleasant reveries, and, with a strange feeling of lassitude and weariness in his limbs, he dragged himself out of bed. The night had exacted its penalty in physical enervation as well as mental torment.

"No more," he kept repeating—"no more of it for me."

Breakfast over, he was drawn by an intense desire, not unmingled with dread, to learn something of Roy Hooker's condition. Not a word had Roy spoken after that blow, and Piper was haunted by the memory of the dazed, uncomprehending look in the boy's eyes.

"He's probably all right now," Sleuth told himself; but he could not dismiss the fear that Roy might not be all right.

Thus worried, he found an early opportunity of getting away from the house, his footsteps leading him toward Hooker's home. The streets of the village bore the deserted appearance usual upon Sunday morning, but to him they seemed ominously silent and lonely. The early church bells began to ring, but the sound was hateful, for it seemed to add to that oppressive loneliness.

On the corner of Main and Middle streets, a block from where Hooker lived, he met Phil Springer, and a single glance told him that here was a companion in misery. For Springer also appeared downcast and troubled, and there was

in his eyes an expression that told of sleep denied.

"Huh-hello, Sleuthy," faltered Phil. "What bub-brings you out so early?"

"Same thing that brought you out, I guess. Heard anything from Roy?"

"Not a word. You?"

"No; just came from home."

"You took your chance to skin out and leave him on our hands, dud-didn't you?" said Phil resentfully. "Cooper just mum-made me stick by till we got him home."

"That was a mean trick of mine," admitted Piper instantly. "I'm sorry I did it, but I was nervous and excited, and I didn't stop to think. How was he? How did he appear? Did he talk any?"

"Not a word. Couldn't seem to gug-get any sense into him. Why, Pipe, he actually acted as if he didn't know wh-where he lived. What do you think of that?"

"I don't know what to think of it. I don't like

to think of it. What did you do? How did you get him into the house?"

"We took him to the door; it was locked. I pounded until we saw a light through the glass and heard some one coming. Then, like the two cheap sus-sus-skates we were, we up and dusted—ran away." Springer was not inclined to spare himself.

Suddenly Sleuth made a grab at his companion's arm. "Look! Here comes Dr. Grindle now! I'll bet he's been to see Roy! Let's ask him."

"Yu-yu-you ask," gurgled Phil, getting pale around the mouth. "It would tut-tut-take me tut-tut-too long."

Medicine-case in hand, the doctor approached, and, assuming as far as possible a natural air, Piper bade him good morning and inquired if there was some one ill "over that way."

"Singular case," said the physician, pausing a moment and regarding the two boys keenly. "It's Roy Hooker. He came home rather late last night and seemed to be dazed and stunned.

There's a bruise on his cheek and another bad one upon the back of his head. His folks got him to bed, thinking he'd be all right, although his mother was frightened and worried. This morning when they tried to question him he wouldn't talk. 'Then they 'phoned for me.'

"Roy Hooker?" exclaimed Piper, making a pretense of astonishment, which, however, gave him a throb of self-scorn. "Why, what do you suppose happened to him, doctor?"

"He may have been in a fight, or perhaps he was hurt some other way. I don't know, but I feel sure one or more persons, probably his intimate friends or companions, must know. Unless he recovers soon and settles it himself, they will be called on to come forward and speak up."

Springer found it impossible to keep still. "Couldn't he say anything at all, doctor?"

"Just two words were all I've been able to draw from him, and they seem to cast no light whatever upon the matter. I decided it was not best to try to press him further in his present condition."

"Two words!" muttered Phil.

"Yes, if I understood correctly, he said, 'two spades.' Now what connection with his condition two spades can have I don't understand, unless one of those bruises upon his head may have been inflicted by such an implement. The bruise on his cheek, I'm sure, was not made in such a manner; and, considering the fact that the one on the back of his head is low down toward the base of the skull, I'm wholly disinclined to believe it was inflicted by anything resembling a spade. Are you boys particular friends of Roy?"

"Oh, not—not particular friends; at least, I'm not," Sleuth hastened to reply. "For some reason, he hasn't seemed to like me very well."

"Then you can't throw any light on this odd affair? You weren't with him last evening?"

"I saw him at the pup-post-office a-bub-bout half past seven," faltered Phil huskily.

"And you didn't see him after that?"

"I don't—remember. I don't th-think so."

"How about you, Billy? Did you see him later in the evening?"

"I wasn't at the post-office," said Piper, finding it impossible to meet the doctor's steady eyes. "I didn't see Hooker there."

"Nor anywhere else?" persisted the physician.

"Nor—anywhere—else."

"Well, he must have been with some one nearly three hours later, and we'll find out who it was when he gets able to talk, if not sooner." The doctor glanced at his watch. "If you hear anything, let me know."

When Dr. Grindle was gone Piper and Springer stood there, looking anywhere but at each other. Presently, however, their eyes met, and then, with the bitterest self-contempt, Billy muttered:

"Two miserable liars, that's what we are!"

CHAPTER XI.

PIPER SURPRISES HIS FRIENDS.

Utterly miserable and ashamed, even feeling themselves abased, the two boys again remained silent for some moments following Piper's self-denunciatory words.

"We juj-just *had* to do it," Springer finally faltered in an effort at self-justification.

"We didn't have to," returned Billy sharply; "but we didn't have the courage to do anything different. We might have told the truth."

"And bub-been branded as two black sheep by every sus-stiff-necked, straightlaced——"

"Of course; but that would have been no more than what's due us for our part in that affair last night."

"I fuf-fuf-fail to see it," snapped Springer in sudden anger. "We weren't to blame for what happened. We were only juj-just playing a little quiet, friendly game of poker, and——"

“We were just gambling, nothing different. You know it, Phil. I’ve thought the whole thing over, and this fiction about a little friendly game was shown to me in its true light. Now wait; don’t get excited. I was tickled almost sick when I blundered into that game last night. I thought it was simply great. I felt that I was doing something real sporty, and it seemed a corking fine thing to sit down with a bunch like that and play cards for money. It wasn’t what I lost that opened my eyes, I tell you that right now. If I’d simply lost my money, I suppose I’d been grouchy over it to myself, but, nothing worse happening, I’d been ready enough to get into the next game, with the hope of winning it back. That’s the way it goes; when a fellow loses he’s bound to play again to get even; if he wins, he can’t quit should he want to, because the other fellows would sneer at him and call him nasty names. So when you’re once started gambling for money, you’ve got to keep it up. Friendly game! Is it friendliness, trying to get

the loose cash of another fellow who needs it as much as you do, and perhaps more?"

"I won't argue a-bub-bout that. Perhaps you're right, but the point doesn't interest me now, with Roy Hooker in his pup-present condition. I didn't like the way the doctor looked at us. Do you thu-think he suspects us, Pipe?"

"Wouldn't wonder a bit," answered Sleuth. "But then, it would be natural for him to be suspicious of any fellow who is friendly with Roy."

"What are we going to do?"

"I dunno. Let's not stand here any longer; let's walk up the street. I've got to move; I can't keep still."

They were on the point of moving when they saw Chipper Cooper hurrying toward them almost at a run.

"Wait!" called the approaching boy. "Where you fellows going?" And then, as he joined them, he asked in a low tone, "Heard anything this morning?"

"I should say we had," answered Billy. After

which he hastily told Cooper what they had learned from Dr. Grindle.

"Oh, my Jinks!" muttered Chipper, aghast. "I was hoping Roy'd be all right this morning. I was hoping he'd explain to his folks—tell them he had a fall or something to account for the bumps he got."

"You were hoping he'd lie," said Billy, with a short, bitter laugh. "We had to lie to the doctor when he cornered us. You can see what the business forces us into—lies! It makes me sick to think of it."

"I've worried all night," sighed Cooper dolefully. "Kept waking up every ten minutes, it seemed, thinking about that scrap and Roy. What was it the doctor said that he said?"

"Just two words, 'two spades.' Of course he meant the two aces of spades in that crooked pack."

"That seems to indicate that he's coming round, don't it? He remembered something."

"And when he cuc-comes round," said

Springer, "he'll be liable to tell the whole business."

They were walking up the street toward the Methodist Church, the bell of which had ceased to sound the first call from the steeple. In less than an hour the church-goers would be hurrying along that street. As they approached the church the sexton, who lived across the way a short distance beyond, came out and hobbled toward home, leaning on his cane.

"Where will we go?" asked Springer. "Hadn't we bub-better take a walk outside the village?"

"I'm not going far," said Piper. "I mean to hang around so that I won't miss any news about Roy. It will be half an hour now before people begin to come to church. Let's go into the old sheds out behind it."

In one of those sheds at the rear of the church they were hidden from the view of any one who might pass upon the street.

"Wish I hadn't ever got to playing in that game," confessed Chipper, who on this morning

showed no signs of his usual light-hearted ways and flippancy in conversation.

"I reckon we all feel the same about that," said Piper; "but it's no use to cry. We shouldn't be thinking so much of ourselves. What if Roy is permanently hurt? What if he never comes round right?"

"Shu-Shultz will be to blame for that."

"Principally; but it wouldn't have happened if Shultz and Osgood hadn't found fellows enough to make up a game, so you see, in a way, we're to blame, too."

"But if Roy does come round all right and tells everything, we're all in the soup," groaned Cooper. "Oh, I'll catch it at home! My father will be furious if he finds out that I ever played cards for money. You know we're not rich—far from it."

"There are others," reminded Piper sharply. "But when it comes out, if it does, Charley Shultz will have to shoulder the most of the blame."

"He dud-don't live in Oakdale. He can get out any tut-time he wants to."

"Shultz won't tell," said Cooper. "Nobody will tell, unless it's Roy. If somebody could get to see him and talk with him privately——"

"I've thought of that," cut in Piper. "If he comes round, he may talk before he realizes what it will mean to the rest of us. Now if somebody could see him and make him remember things, he might be warned to keep mum. Who's going to try it?"

"Why dud-don't you?" suggested Springer.

"Why don't *you*?" flung back Billy. "I've never been real chummy with Roy."

"I'd mum-make a mess of it," said Phil, the idea causing him to shrink.

"Somebody has got to do it," declared Piper, "and there shouldn't be much time wasted. The fact that Roy spoke to the doctor shows he's coming out of his daze. He's liable to remember everything all at once. Perhaps the sight of one of us would make him remember. Besides Osgood and Shultz, of course we're the only ones

in the game who can go to him, and those fellows couldn't do it without rousing suspicion. It's up to us. Who's going?"

No one volunteered, and after a time Springer feebly suggested that they should draw lots. They were about to do so, when of a sudden Piper commanded all his resolution.

"I'll go," he announced. "We won't draw; that would be gambling, in a way, and I'm done with anything of the sort. I'll go."

They looked at him in wonderment, vaguely realizing that this prying chap, who had succeeded in making himself rather unpopular at school, was the possessor of a certain determination and resolution with which he had never been credited.

"That's the stuff, Sleuthy," applauded Chipper. "Good old Sleuthy!"

"Now cut that name out," requested Piper in a manner that was more like a command. "I'm done with that, too. I've been rather proud to have fellows call me Sleuth, but it makes me sick now, and I'm liable to fight any one who chucks

it at me in future. If you want to do me a favor, you'll tell the fellows so. Perhaps it will make them worse; perhaps they'll think it fun to keep that nickname stuck on to me. But there'll be fights—I tell you there'll be fights!"

"Gee!" breathed Springer, staring at the speaker's flushed face. "You're a regular bub-bantam, Pipe. Well, if you dud-don't like it, I'll never call you that again."

"Me, too; witness my solemn pledge," said Cooper, lifting his left hand and jerking it down to put up his right. "Phil and I owe you that much for what you've offered to do just now."

"Perhaps I won't get in to see Roy," said Billy; "but I'm going to ask the privilege. Even if I do get in, maybe I won't have a chance to talk with him without anybody round."

"Report as soon as you can," urged Chipper.

"Do," begged Phil. "We'll go up to my house, Cooper and I; you'll find us there."

They left the sheds, and Piper set forth along High Street toward Willow, on which Hooker

lived. He had not reached Willow when he met Jack Nelson.

"What are you doing, Sleuth?" asked Jack. "You were striding off like a man with a mission. Is the great detective on the trail this——"

"Now that will be enough, Nelson, old man—that will be enough," interrupted Piper. "I've just given certain parties notice that this detective gag is played out and I'm done with it. Also, my friends aren't to call me Sleuth any more if they wish to remain friends. Grin—grin if you want to. I mean it. I'll prob'ly be carrying around black eyes and body contusions for a while, but as soon as it becomes generally known in this town that I don't want to be called Sleuth and I won't stand any more for the detective joke, I'm going to begin punching anybody who disregards the warning."

"Well, I'll be blowed!" breathed Nelson. "I thought you were proud of it. Only last night you offered to do a little piece of detective work for me. What did you find out?"

"Nothing," was the instant answer—"nothing that concerns you in any way."

"And you're disgusted over your failure, eh? I didn't suppose you'd get down-hearted so easy. No great detective ever——" But the look on Billy's face caused Jack to stop short. "Oh, say!" he exclaimed; "have you heard about Hooker? I was just told that he——"

"I've heard about it," said Piper, preparing to pass on. "I'm going to see him now, if they'll let me. Dr. Grindle told Springer and me all about it."

"It's queer," said Nelson. "Aren't you quitting your professional career at a moment when there's a case that would really justify your investigation? Perhaps that's why you're going to see him. Perhaps you mean to——"

"No, that's not the reason. Guess I'll skip along."

"If you find out anything, let a fellow know," Nelson called after him.

"If you only knew what I know now!" muttered Piper, as he turned down Willow Street.

CHAPTER XII.

DREAD.

Much to his disappointment, Billy Piper was not permitted to see Roy Hooker. At the door Roy's mother, who was plainly in a deeply distressed and anxious state of mind, told him that the doctor had given orders that Roy was not to be disturbed and had administered a mild opiate to quiet the unfortunate lad, who had grown fearfully excited when questioned concerning the cause of his injury.

"It's a dreadful thing, Billy Piper,—a dreadful thing!" she exclaimed. "I don't know why any one should hurt my poor boy like that. Some one must have done it. It was a wicked thing—a wicked, wicked thing! What if he never recovers? What if he is always wrong in his head? He doesn't seem to remember anything, and maybe he never will."

"It can't be as bad as that, Mrs. Hooker," said Billy, in an effort to cheer her up. "We—I talked with the doctor a short time ago, and he seems to think Roy will come round all right very soon. Don't you think he fell, or something, and hurt himself that way?"

"How could he fall and hurt his face and the back of his head at the same time? I'm sure some one struck him, and it was a wicked blow. But we'll find out who it was; such things always come out in time. You know all the boys, Billy Piper. Do you know anything about it? Have you heard anything?"

"Of course not, Mrs. Hooker," answered Piper, feeling cheap and mean and miserable. "Do you think I wouldn't tell you if I knew anything?"

"Not unless—— Oh, but of course you weren't concerned in it. But perhaps you can find out, Billy. Roy says you're a real wonder at finding out anything you want to know, and we all remember how you and Roy caught one of those bank robbers. Roy gave you all the credit.

He said that you tracked the man, and that you even knew all about Fred Sage's brother being alive before any one else was aware of it. Now, if you can do things like that, why can't you find out who hurt my boy? The scoundrel who did it should be punished. Won't you try to find out the truth and tell us about it?" Entreating him thus, she placed her hand on his shoulder, and it was with the greatest difficulty that he refrained from shrinking beneath her touch.

"I'll do all I can," he promised in a low tone. "I'm awful sorry this happened, Mrs. Hooker, but, believe me, I can't really think any one hurt Roy maliciously and with deliberate design. It must have been an accident."

"If it was that, wouldn't the person who did it come forward and own up?"

"Perhaps not. Perhaps he's frightened. Roy has a temper, you know, and maybe he got into a fight with some one who struck him in self-defense."

"Any boy who would do such a thing, and then keep still about it with his victim in a dangerous

condition, is a bad, bad fellow. 'There are some very bad boys in Oakdale, Billy, and you must know it. Roy has said more than once that you're a regular detective. Here is something for you to detect—something worth while.'

"I've been a chump," acknowledged Piper, with an unmistakable intonation of self-scorn. "I've played that detective game for my own amusement, and made lots of trouble by it. I'm done with it now, Mrs. Hooker, for it's sneaky, cheap, underhand business. Any one who wants to become a detective may do so for all of me—I never shall."

"Then you won't try to find out? You won't help us any?"

"I've promised already to do all I can, and I shall keep my promise, Mrs. Hooker. But I'm sure you're unnecessarily worried. Roy will be all right to-morrow. Of course he will tell you everything."

He departed with his head hanging and his feet dragging, a spiritless, downcast chap.

"Another lie," he muttered. "What will she

think of me when she knows? And she'll find out. She was right, things like this always come out. Well, I see where some fellows in this town will have something to live down, and I'm one of them."

Springer and Cooper received his report with disappointment.

"You made a fuf-fizzle of it," said Phil. "You didn't do anything."

"Nothing except tell a lie. I led Roy's mother to believe that I didn't know a thing about it."

"You couldn't do anything else," said Cooper.

"I could have told the truth, couldn't I?"

"That would have been peaching; that would have been blowing on us all. You couldn't do that."

"If you fellows have got the notion that we're going to hide and escape through lying and deception, you'd better give it up. We'll have to shoulder our part of the blame, sooner or later."

"That's fine!" sighed Chipper dolefully. "My father hasn't used the strap on me for some time,

but I'm going to pad my trousers in preparation for the coming wallop."

"I'd like to pup-punch old Shultz!" rasped Springer. "He's the one that's to bub-blame for it all."

"No," contradicted Piper promptly, "we can't duck behind any such excuse. If we hadn't been there it never would have happened, for it takes more than two or three to make up a decent game of poker. We were all doing something on the sly—something that we didn't wish respectable people to know about, and something we mortally dread to have them find out about."

"Dread it!" groaned Chipper. "I should say I do!"

"It wasn't a cuc-crime," spluttered Springer, in an attempt at justification.

"I don't know about that," snapped Billy. "Gambling is illegal, and so it was a crime."

"Oh, but we wasn't gug-gambling; we were just playing for fun."

"And we're getting a lot of fun out of it, aren't we? Perhaps you enjoy it!"

At this point Phil's anger blazed and he raged at Billy, calling him chicken-hearted. Piper refused to listen; shrugging his shoulders, he walked hastily away, heedless of the calls of the two lads, who begged him to come back.

The church bells were sounding the second call and people in their Sunday clothes were passing on their way to services when Piper rang at Mrs. Chester's door. The maid appeared, and, answering his inquiry, informed him that Ned Osgood had already departed for church.

"He goes every Sunday reg'ler," she said, with a touch of pride. "The misses calls him 'a most exempl'ry young man.' Maybe you'll see him at the church if you go, too."

"Thank you," said Billy, descending the steps.

As soon as possible, he struck off across lots, to avoid the church-goers. "A most exempl'ry young man!" he muttered, with a short laugh. "He's got her fooled. She doesn't know what's been going on in his rooms every Saturday night. I wonder if she's heard about Roy? Don't s'pose

she'd have an idea anything happened to him in her house if she has heard."

He next thought of finding Shultz, but, from lack of courage or an aversion for facing the fellow, could not bring himself to look for the prime cause of all the trouble.

Returning home, he found the house deserted, his folks being away to church, and his manner of wandering restlessly about through the empty rooms made him think of the old simile about the caged tiger. It was practically impossible for him to keep still. He wanted to do something, and his tortured conscience bade him do the right thing; but what that was, he could not for the life of him decide. Gradually his restlessness wore away, but still dread, like a bird of evil omen, seemed to hover near.

His parents returned, and, as usually happened when he remained away from church, which, it must be confessed, was often, he was sharply scolded by his father. Mr. Piper was much given to scolding, but only when especially aroused did he attempt to exert genuine parental

authority over his son. In fact, Billy, like far too many boys of the present day, was permitted to do practically as he pleased as long as he did **not** worry his folks by getting into "scrapes."

The day wore slowly away without further information concerning Hooker until near night, when it was learned that some one had made inquiries about him over the phone, and that his mother had said his condition seemed unchanged.

At dusk Piper met Chipper Cooper at the end of the upper bridge. They looked at each other inquiringly, and, after some moments of silence, Chipper said:

"Well?"

"Well?" returned Billy with precisely the same inflection.

"I'm pretty near sick," declared Cooper. "I hear Roy is no better. It's bad, Pipe—bad."

"Rotten," agreed Billy, leaning against the railing.

Cooper leaned at his side, and their tongues seemed chained. Beneath the bridge the water gurgled and whispered. In the gathering shad-

ows a robin called plaintively from a treetop some distance away. The village appeared almost as deserted and lonely as the hamlet of Goldsmith's immortal poem. A heavy weight, like lead, seemed to weigh upon the souls of the two unhappy boys.

After a time Cooper heaved a sigh.

"It's bad," he repeated—"bad!"

"Rotten," said Piper again.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PROFESSOR'S APPEAL.

Looking careworn and old, Professor Richardson called the first session to order on Monday morning. The scholars and the two assistant instructors were assembled in the big main room. Every one seemed to feel that there was something unusual impending, and all eyes were turned upon the sober face of the aged principal as he pushed his gold-rimmed spectacles up upon his forehead and tapped gently but authoritatively upon his desk.

"It becomes my duty to speak of an unpleasant matter," said the professor, in a voice a trifle husky from the effect of a cold. "For some time I have felt that I would have to face this necessity. I have held my present position with this institution for eighteen years, which is a trifle more than one-fourth of man's allotted span of

life, three score and ten—a very long time. When I took up my work here I scarcely fancied it would continue so long, and at least twice in the earlier years of my stay I had opportunities to go elsewhere in the same capacity. One of these opportunities, the second which presented itself, was very tempting, and I debated not a little with myself regarding the advisability of accepting. At that time, however, I had just begun to feel myself bound to Oakdale Academy by strong yet tender ties, and it was my heart rather than my head which led me at last to decline the alluring offer. I have now been here so long that Oakdale, more than any other place I know, seems like home, and it is my hope to remain here among my many kind friends as long as I live.

“Necessarily, there have been some unpleasant features in connection with my services as principal of this academy, but, for the most part, I am happy to say that pleasant memories predominate. Having felt that my life work was to be teaching, I have ever sought to perform

that work as faithfully and thoroughly and conscientiously as possible. Nor do I think I have neglected striving to enter into sympathy with my pupils; I have always sought to understand their varying natures, to make allowances for their natural faults and failings, and to encourage all their worthy desires and ambitions. This is by far a more difficult thing for a teacher than may seem possible to the youthful mind. The difference in years, which must necessarily exist between instructor and pupils, is bound to produce a pronounced difference in habits, methods of thought and the viewpoint from which life in general is regarded, and that instructor who has the ability always to put himself in sympathy with the young mind beneath his guidance is indeed fortunate.

“In the last eighteen years athletics and allied sports, as relating to schools and colleges, have made amazing progress. I will not enter into a discussion as to whether such things have not obtained too powerful a hold upon our modern institutions of learning, for that really has little

bearing upon what I wish to say. In my boyhood, baseball was, indeed, a very crude sort of a game, and football was practically unknown in this country. At the present time there is in America no school or college of importance attended by males that does not have its baseball and football teams; and other similar games, such as ice hockey and basketball, have become amazingly popular, the latter even being played by teams made up of girl students.

"I am aware that many young school instructors have fostered and encouraged such tendencies, some of them even taking part in the coaching of teams made up from their pupils. Nevertheless, had I myself at one time been an enthusiast in such sports, I sincerely doubt if I ever should have felt it either my duty or my place to follow the example of such instructors. For it seems to me that there is, or should be, a distinct dividing line over which the conscientious principal of a school may not wisely step.

"I maintain that I am not prejudiced against any healthy, beneficial sport or pastime in which

students may indulge, unless it is carried to that excess which threatens physical injury or infringes upon and retards mental advancement. When, however, a student becomes so wrapped up and absorbed in baseball that he neglects his studies and can seem to think of nothing save the game that has fixed its subtle but damaging grip upon him, I am of the firm belief that it is high time something should be done. When I see naturally bright students falling back in their classes, recklessly refusing to give a proper amount of time to studies and openly declaring their resentment at the old foggy idea that mental training is first and foremost the great object of all schools for the young, I unhesitatingly assert that those boys are being injured by the present craze for sport.

“It has been my purpose, as far as possible, to restrain such mistaken fanaticism. As far as possible I have always tried to appeal directly to the misguided boy himself, and up to the present term I pride myself that I have succeeded fairly well. This spring, however, my task has become

more difficult, and my efforts have, I regret to say, produced results far from satisfactory to me. I am aware that behind my back I have been more or less derided by certain scholars. It has been all too apparent that a new feeling of rebellion against interference from me has crept into the school. This feeling has steadily increased, until of late it has developed into downright defiance of my authority and desires. It has affected discipline. It has led me at last to make this direct appeal to you, scholars, as a body.

“Even if the day of corporal punishment had not practically passed, I am sure, were I physically capable, I would not resort to such measures in order to maintain discipline. Nevertheless, I will admit that there are scholars to-day who cannot be reached by appeal or moral suasion, yet who doubtless would be led to see the error of their ways by physical suasion. They are generally the leaders in defiance of discipline; such fellows as smoke upon the grounds and in the building, regardless of rules or requests to desist; such as use bad language, absent themselves from

classes, or repeatedly appear in classes only to declare themselves unprepared. With pernicious ingenuity they devise all sorts of methods to break rules and regulations and to defy their instructors, whom they foolishly seem to regard not as their friends but as their enemies.

“There are such boys in this school. They are fostering dissension, defiance of authority, and are priming themselves and their associates for downright and open rebellion. I think I know them all. If I chose, I could give their names, but I will not do so—now. Not only is their influence harmful in the classroom, but it is seriously injurious to those with whom they associate outside the confines and hours of school. One such lad may do an incalculable amount of injury to others. The example of every human being is bound to have some effect upon those with whom he associates, and they will be polluted, just as a clear river is polluted by a foul tributary. Some of his worst self such a lad pours into those with whom he comes in contact.

"There's an old saying that boys will be boys. Boys can be boys and still be decent. There is nothing reprehensible in the natural boisterous high spirits of a vigorous young animal; it is only when such high spirits and vigor is misdirected, that it becomes injurious. Many a time, as I have watched a band of youngsters frolicking naturally in the sheer joy of bounding youth, I have felt a tugging at my heartstrings and a regret for that which the years have taken from me. Always, however, when they have been my scholars, there has been a sort of deep pleasure and satisfaction mingled with that regret; for it has seemed that, in a way, they were a part of my life, and that my association with them repaid me in a measure for the loss of that splendid thing which time had filched from me.

"But when I have known that certain scholars were breaking rules and defying authority with malicious perverseness, I have felt more than resentment or anger—I have felt sorrow. When I have seen, as has sometimes happened of late, my boys banding together at night upon street

corners, behaving offensively, moving surreptitiously, betraying by unmistakeable signs that they were engaged in stealthy and secret purposes, my alarm and distress has overcome both anger and sorrow. I have not known just what was taking place, but I have felt that there were things happening which ought not to happen. I have felt sure, likewise, that something bad was bound to come of it.

“This brings me to speak of Roy Hooker. I am sure you all know about him. Roy is not a bad boy, his inclinations are not pernicious, yet I am aware that he has been associating with those who could do him no good. On Saturday night, at a late hour, he met with an injury—an injury from which, perhaps, he may never recover. This injury was inflicted by one or more blows upon the head, and it seems to have deprived him of the power of speech and memory. Since that time he has scarcely spoken half a dozen coherent words. It is not at all probable that Roy was injured in this manner while alone, yet up to the present time no associate of his has had the

manhood to come forward and tell precisely how it happened.

"This seems to me evidence enough that Roy was hurt in a manner that was regarded as shameful, if not actually criminal. Otherwise, why should the person or persons with him at the time take so much pains to prevent the truth of the matter from becoming known? Whoever they were, they have shown a lack of courage that seems absolutely cowardly. I'm certain there's not one of them who does not carry in his breast a tortured conscience, and this is one of the most certain punishments for wrong-doing. The evil-doer, if he possesses any of the finer human sensibilities, must always endure the writhings of a wounded conscience. If Roy Hooker should not recover, those responsible for his condition must bear all through life a sickening burden.

"Let us, however, hope for the best. I have talked with Dr. Grindle this morning, and he encouraged me to believe that Roy would come through all right. It is not impossible that he

may recover sufficiently to-day to tell precisely what happened. In that case, unless others come forward without delay, it will be too late for them to escape the brand of cowardice. It may require an amount of moral courage to confess the truth, but such a confession will partly atone for the silence so far maintained. Time is fleeting."

But if Professor Richardson expected any of his scholars to come forward at once with a confession he was disappointed; and, after several minutes of waiting, during which he busied himself by pretending to arrange some papers on his desk, he slowly returned his spectacles to their usual place astride his thin nose and regretfully announced that the regular course of the session would be taken up.

CHAPTER XIV.

PIPER PUTS IT UP TO SHULTZ.

Never had a morning session at school seemed so wretchedly long to Billy Piper. The hands of the old clock on the wall behind Professor Richardson's desk actually seemed to stand still.

At intermission Billy sought an opportunity to speak a word in private with Charley Shultz, but was prevented from doing so, Shultz being surrounded by several boisterous fellows, who made a great deal of noise and laughed often and loudly. In this general chatter Charley took part, but Piper was certain that his loud talk and laughter were inspired by a desire to appear care-free and untroubled. Once Shultz's eyes met Billy's, which led him to frown and turn his glance quickly away, a sullen, resentful expression flashing across his face for a moment.

The other members of that Saturday night

party seemed not at all disposed to associate with one another. Ned Osgood put himself to much trouble to chat with Rod Grant, which was something unusual, as he had never before betrayed a particular liking for the Texan's company. Phil Springer hung around Nelson and Stone, who talked baseball when they had finished speculating over the mystery of Roy Hooker's injury. Cooper slipped away by himself, and returned only when it was time to get back to his seat and his books.

At last the hands of the clock stood perpendicular, one over the other, and, having announced that he would remain at his desk a few minutes to speak with any one who wished to have a word with him, Professor Richardson dismissed the scholars. A few of the boys lingered, curious to observe if any one should approach the principal, but all of the fellows who could have cleared up the mystery made haste to get out of the room.

Again Piper was baffled in his effort to speak privately with Shultz, who walked away between

two girls, talking and laughing like one who bore no shadow of apprehension in his heart.

"He's putting up a big bluff," muttered Billy. "He never troubled himself before to be so jolly sociable with those girls. He can't carry it off like Osgood; he hasn't got the natural swing."

Piper bolted his dinner with such haste that his mother was led to warn him of indigestion, with which he was sometimes troubled.

"As soon as it comes spring," she said, "you get baseball crazy, Will, and you don't like to stay home a minute longer than you have to."

"It's not baseball to-day, mother," he answered. "I wonder if anybody has heard anything new about Roy?"

"I haven't, not a word. I thought perhaps you might at school. You're always so quick to see through things, haven't you an idea what happened to him?"

"Do you think I wouldn't tell if I had?"

"No, but it seems queer nobody knows anything at all about it. Can't you even guess, Will?"

"No, I can't," he answered brusquely, pushing

back and jumping up from the table. "It's never been my habit to guess; I've always had something to base my theories on."

"And you haven't a thing in this case?"

"Of course not." He grabbed his cap and almost bolted from the house.

"Still more lies!" he half snarled, as he hurried along the street. "My own mother will lose confidence in me when she finds out the truth. It's the most miserable piece of business I ever got mixed up in."

Straight to Mrs. Chester's home he hastened, and his heart gave a throb of satisfaction when the maid, admitting him, stated that Charley Shultz was with Osgood in the latter's room.

They were talking in low tones when Piper unceremoniously opened the door and entered that room. Osgood had been pacing up and down, but Shultz was standing by the window. Both looked startled.

"You're just the two fellows I want to see," said Billy, closing the door carefully behind him.

"Who invited you in?" growled Shultz. "Why didn't you knock?"

"Won't you sit down?" invited Ned, in his usual courteous manner, which had at first seemed like affectation to the boys of Oakdale.

"Thanks," said Piper. "Don't believe I care to. I've been trying to get a private word with Shultz, and this is the first time——"

"If you wish to talk with him privately I'll step out."

"No need of it. What I want to say I can say just as well with you here, Osgood, old man."

"We were having a little private talk of our own when you butted in," said Shultz sourly.

"When I'm through there'll be plenty of time for you to finish up. I won't be long, and I'll get out the minute I've had my say. It's about this wretched scrape—about Hooker."

"It is a wretched scrape," agreed Osgood. "I'm greatly disturbed over it, and of course you must be also, Piper. What are we to do?"

"That's just what I want to talk to Shultz

about. Something has got to be done, and that pretty quick, too. It strikes me that Shultz is the fellow to do it."

The boy named swung round and squared himself, his red lips pressed together, his eyes staring straight at Billy from beneath lowered brows. "I suppose," he began harshly, "you think you're going to shoulder the whole business onto me. If you do, you want to forget it, and forget it quick. I'm no more to blame than the rest of the bunch. It's true I hit Hooker a poke, but he brought it on himself, and you know it. He accused me of cheating."

"It was your blow that knocked him against that mantelpiece and dazed him so that he hasn't been able to talk or remember. In stating that the truth was sure to come out soon, Professor Richardson was doubtless correct."

"Ah, don't talk to me about that old dried-up shrimp!" cried Shultz fiercely. "He practically owned up before the whole school that he was a back number. He's no more fit to be the principal of Oakdale Academy than I am—nor half

as much. It's time he retired and let a younger and better man fill his place."

"I didn't come here to argue that point. I say he was right in asserting that the truth about Hooker is bound to come out. Now are you going to wait and let the facts be found out through some other channel, or are you going to brace up and make a clean breast of it?"

"Now wouldn't that be fine!" sneered Shultz. "You want me to blow the whole thing, do you? You want me to come out and tell the general public that a bunch of us were here in Ned's rooms gambling, and that in a quarrel over the cards I hit Roy Hooker. Do you think for a minute that by doing so I'll make you stand better in the public eye?"

"Somebody has got to tell it before Hooker tells, himself," persisted Piper. "As you're the fellow mainly involved, it seems to me it's up to you."

"And if I don't tell, I suppose you'll run and peach, you common tattler!" frothed Shultz, tak-

ing a step forward, his fists clenched, his face crimson with rage.

Piper stood his ground.

"Perhaps it will make you more popular with yourself if you hit me," he said. "You can't frighten me, Shultz, with black looks and bluster. I knew what you'd do, but I made up my mind to talk straight to you, and I'm going to talk, even if you knock me down and jump on me with both feet."

"There'll be nothing of that kind happen in here," announced Osgood, taking a position to interfere in case Shultz's wrath should gain absolute control of him. "We were talking of this thing when you came in, Piper."

"That old dead one, Richardson, tried to make folks believe it would be a courageous thing to come forward and confess," said Shultz; "but anybody knows that the fellow who squeals is usually a coward. He's frightened into it. That's the trouble with you, Piper; you're scared stiff. You haven't any nerve at all."

"Scared?" retorted Billy. "I didn't hit

Hooker. The worst that can be said about me is that I was playing poker here and that I joined with the rest of the bunch in keeping still about what happened to Roy. You know, Shultz, that there was no one else save yourself and Roy to blame for that wind-up of the game. Now if we all keep still and wait till it comes out, every one of us will be in the soup; but if you have the nerve and manhood to go to Professor Richardson or Dr. Grindle and tell just what the finish of that game was, without naming any one besides yourself and Hooker, it will——”

“Ho! ho!” scoffed Shultz. “So that’s what you want! I knew it; I knew you were trying to save your own hide somehow. You want me to expose myself as a real thug and scoundrel, in order that you and the rest may get off scot-free. Fine—I don’t think. I’ll rush right away and do it—not.”

“Osgood is your particular friend, isn’t he? Can’t you see any reason why you should shield him, dismissing consideration for the rest of us? You were here playing poker in Ned’s rooms.

'An unfortunate misunderstanding—I hope that's what it was—brought about that encounter with Hooker. You can tell the story and refuse to name the others who were in the game. More than half the people will consider that an act of decency on your part. They won't blame you for trying to shield the rest of the crowd, although they may attempt to worm our names from you.'

"It wouldn't do any good, anyhow," asserted Shultz. "As soon as Hooker gets straightened out and remembers things, he'll tell; he'll name all of us."

"There's the unpleasant possibility that Hooker may not get straightened out, Shultz. Anyhow, perhaps it will be some time before he does. Perhaps he'll come around gradually, and some of us may be able to see him and caution him to keep mum. It's the only chance."

"And if he doesn't come around at all, and none of the crowd squeals, how are they ever going to find out just what happened? There you are."

"They will find it out, Shultz; I've made up my mind to that."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that somebody is going to tell the truth. If you don't do it, somebody else will."

Osgood was compelled to grapple with Shultz, who strove to reach Billy, crying hoarsely:

"Let me get at that little whelp! He's threatening to blow on us! I'll fix him!"

"No, you won't," said Ned, displaying an amount of strength that surprised Piper, who still remained apparently calm and undisturbed. "He hasn't said that he's going to blow."

"But that was what he meant."

Ned thrust the raging fellow back and held him until he had calmed down somewhat.

"What did you mean, Piper?" Osgood asked over his shoulder. "Did you mean that you were going to chase right out of here and tell every one?"

"That wasn't exactly what I meant," answered Billy. "I'm going to talk with the rest of the crowd. I'm going to tell them just where I stand

and what I think. I'm going to do my best to induce them, one and all, to put it up to Shultz just as I have put it up to him. Then, if he isn't man enough to shoulder the blame, I'll suggest that we all walk up in a body and tell the whole thing."

"You see! you see!" panted Shultz. "That's his game! He's a squealer! He's bound to make me the goat."

"Give me a chance to talk to him," urged Osgood. "I'm sure Billy will listen to reason."

"I'm ready to listen to reason," said Piper; "but argument on false premises won't have the slightest effect on me. I've thought this thing all over and decided on the only proper course to be followed."

"But you can see," said Ned, almost pleadingly, "that you're asking a most difficult thing of Charley."

"That doesn't make it any less the right thing," was the unbending retort.

"Confound him!" cried Shultz. "Did you ever see such an obstinate, stiff-necked little brat!

He's bound to besmirch me. He wants to drive me out of the school, that's what's the matter. He's got it in for us both, Ned. That's because we don't happen to belong in this miserable one-horse burg. I've had troubles enough. If I get fired from this school my old man is going to froth, I tell you that. And I'll be fired just as sure as the facts are known."

"I see further talk will be a waste of time," said Piper, "so I think I'll be going."

"Wait a minute," requested Osgood. "You must realize that you sprung this thing on us rather suddenly. We haven't had time to think it over. Give us time, won't you?"

"At this stage of the game time counts, for there's no telling how soon Hooker will be able to talk."

"A little time," persisted Ned. "Let me talk it over with Charley. Try to put yourself in his place and see if you can't realize——"

"All right," cut in Billy, suddenly deciding it was best to yield a little. "Talk it over. I won't make another move until I see you again. But

it's no use dilly-dallying, and Shultz may as well understand it."

Without a word of adieu, he opened the door and left them.

CHAPTER XV.

STILL, SILENT.

Osgood and Shultz arrived at the academy barely in time to escape tardy marks. As they slid into their seats neither of them glanced toward Piper, who had an eye turned upon them, and at intermission both seemed anxious to keep away from him. Watching them, he saw Ned, seeking to avoid general attention, pass a few low, hasty words with both Springer and Cooper.

"That won't do you a bit of good," thought the determined boy. "If you get the whole of the rest of the bunch to stick by you, I'll give them fair warning and speak up myself."

Shultz evidently took pains not to be seen with any of the fellows who had participated in the card game, but never for a moment during that intermission did he give Piper an opportunity to address him when other scholars were not close

by. Fully aware that the fellow would refuse to step aside with him, Piper made the request of Osgood.

"Well, you've had time," said Billy, as they paused beneath one of the trees near the academy. "What have you done? What are you going to do?"

"It will be all right," assured Osgood suavely, "only just don't push the thing too hard; for if you do, Shultz may balk, and that would put us all in a hole. You've got to think of some one besides yourself, Piper."

"I am; I'm thinking of Hooker."

"I tell you it will be all right," reiterated Ned. "Just give us a little more time. Don't do anything foolish."

The bell struck, recalling them to the building, and, far from satisfied, Billy returned to fix his mind as best he could upon his studies.

Before dismissing school for the day, Professor Richardson stood beside his desk and again pushed his spectacles upward on his forehead. His thin cheeks were unnaturally flushed, and

his voice had changed from huskiness to a croaking sound, which seemed to indicate that the cold had gripped him at his throat. Silence fell upon the room, for every one seemed to know the topic upon which the principal was about to speak, and more than one boy felt a shiver run through him.

"I regret," began the professor, "that my talk of this morning had so little effect. I've waited, vainly hoping that some one might come to me with the truth concerning Roy Hooker. At noon I again saw Dr. Grindle, and I'm glad to say that what he told me was almost an assurance that Roy would fully recover, and that very soon. The unfortunate boy was able to talk a little this forenoon, and although no one urged him, he said enough to give an inkling of the cause of his trouble."

For a moment he paused, his eyes seeming to rove from face to face before him, and the shivering ones found it most difficult to meet his look and appear interested without betraying guilt. How much had Hooker told? That was

the question that made every pulse throb, even while their blood seemed to run chill.

"I spoke this morning of evil influences and bad associates," continued the principal. "There's no need to repeat what I said. From Hooker's rambling words, it has become apparent that upon Saturday night he was engaged in a game of cards—for money. In short, he was gambling. Where and with whom, he did not state, and it was not thought best to worry him in his present condition with too many questions. Of course he was gaming with his usual companions, his so-called friends. That means almost to a certainty that some who are now listening to my words were with him. I will repeat my assertion that the names of his companions must assuredly become known.

"What happened to him in that game may readily be surmised. There was a quarrel. There were blows, and he was dreadfully injured. It will be a merciful thing if his reason is not permanently affected. The actual cause of the quarrel is yet a matter of surmisal, but whoever enters

into a gambling game invites disaster. Greed and triumph fills the heart of the winner; bitterness and resentment fixes its hold upon the loser. Suspicion is aroused. At the slightest happening which seems to confirm suspicion there is an arousal of bad blood and a quarrel. We have here an example of how serious such a quarrel may be, and it should be a lesson to all of you—a lesson to be remembered always. It should teach you to shun gambling as you would shun a contagious disease. It is a disease that undermines the moral fiber and manhood of any one it touches. Having been contaminated, there is only one remedy, one cure:—good resolutions, the determination to shun this evil thing in future, and the will-power to hold fast to that determination.

“A person who makes up his mind to do right in the future, and is sincere about it, seldom hesitates to admit his errors or mistakes of the past. There are always willing hands to help one who thus proves his sincere change of heart. I hope before it is too late I may yet receive the evidence that some of you are sincerely repentant and sin-

cerely determined henceforth to avoid such mistakes. You are dismissed."

The old man puttered around, gathering up his books and papers and locking his desk. When he was ready to leave he found himself alone in the big room.

"Ah, well!" he muttered; "it's hard for them. I'm afraid I haven't sufficient influence. I'm afraid I failed to make my words convincing."

Outside, the members of the ball team had turned toward the nearby field for practice, but they were not talking of baseball. The knowledge that Roy Hooker had been engaged in a card game for money caused their tongues to wag vigorously. Speculation was rife as to where the game had taken place and who had been concerned in it. Several of them, while pretending ignorance, knew very well indeed, and at least one who was not in the secret was inclined to believe he could make a good guess at the truth.

Jack Nelson had not forgotten that Roy Hooker was one of the trio in Hyde's livery stable, after the return from Wyndham, to whom Ned Osgood

had said that he would see them later. But, having nothing further on which to base his surmisal, and never dreaming how much Billy Piper knew, Nelson refrained from hints or accusations. Perhaps in this he was supported by the belief that, taking into consideration the benching of Osgood in Saturday's game, it might seem that he had a pronounced animus against the fellow were he to suggest that Ned knew more than he was disposed to tell.

"As Prof said," thought Nelson, "it's bound to come out, and I won't make any blunder if I keep my mouth shut."

One thing he did not understand was why Piper, knowing certain fellows met regularly Saturday evenings in Osgood's rooms, seemed to show so little interest in the matter. It was wholly unlike Billy, who heretofore had displayed the most eager disposition to probe anything which bore on its face the tag of mystery. Even Piper's protestation that he was done with such things and would play the detective no more

did not seem to be an adequate excuse for his apathy.

"It's all mighty queer," decided Jack, as, taking little part in the talk of the boys around him, he got into his uniform in the gymnasium. "Osgood doesn't seem at all worried, but his friend Shultz is altogether too gay to be natural. It's not like him. Well, if they're concerned, they're in deep, and it wouldn't surprise me if the nine lost a couple of good players."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW.

Practice that night was a failure; no one seemed to enter into it with heart or enthusiasm. The ball was batted and thrown around listlessly, and Nelson's efforts to wake the fellows up bore no fruit. And so, after a time, seeing that this sort of work would do the boys no good, the captain put an end to it.

"It's plain we haven't our minds on the business in hand, fellows," he said, "so we'll quit it for to-night. I fancy we're all thinking too much about what happened to Hooker."

They straggled back to the gymnasium, which stood just outside the grounds, and took their showers and rub-downs and dressed. There was not much talk now, and very little joshing or laughter. Cooper perpetrated a pun, but no one seemed to notice it. Even beneath the hissing,

spattering cold showers there was not much of the usual whooping and shouting; they dove into the icy spray, gasped, jumped out, grabbed their towels, scrubbed and dressed. Then, one by one, or in little groups, they departed.

Charley Shultz followed Ned Osgood from the gym and overtook him outside.

"There goes that cub, Piper, along with Phil Springer," he said anxiously. "Cooper's ahead of them. They're all going the same way. Let's hustle up and overtake them."

Ned restrained him. "Let them go, Charley. It won't do any good to chase them, and it may look suspicious to others."

"Did you get a chance to say anything to Phil and Chipper?"

"Sure. Couldn't talk to them much, but I told them what Piper was up to, and urged them to hold him in check."

"What did they say?"

"They're worried. They said they'd do their best."

"He'll bring them round," snarled Shultz. "I

never saw such a vicious, determined little imp. I figured him out to be a wishy-washy, spineless creature, but, on my word, he's the most obstinate, pig-headed fellow I ever ran up against. He's got it in for me; he's bound to queer me."

"He'll queer us both if he sticks to his plan," said Ned, in a discouraged way. "It's going to hit me about as hard as it will you, old fellow. I had to get out of Hadden Hall because I was caught with a bunch playing poker in my room in one of the dormitories. My mother insisted that I should attend a smaller and quieter school where there would be less temptation, and that's how I happened to come here."

"There's a bond of sympathy between us," declared the other boy, with a grin. "I was expelled from Berkley for fighting, and before that I got into trouble in the public school of my own town. Like you, it's my mother who wants me to have an education. The old man was for putting me to work with my coat off after the Berkley affair."

They had paused near the academy gate.

"Going home?" asked Ned.

"Home?" exclaimed Charley, misunderstanding him. "If I've got to get out of this town I'll strike out for myself; I'll keep away from home."

"I mean are you going, now, to your boarding place?"

"Oh! I guess not yet. I'll walk up with you. I want to talk this thing over a little more."

To avoid passing through the center of the village, they crossed the yard to a field behind it, which brought them to Middle Street. As they went along, Shultz was saying:

"My people aren't such swells as yours, Ned, though the old man is making some money. They're German, but I was born in this country. It's only lately that my father has been scraping together some dollars. All his life he's had to pinch, and now he hangs on to the mazuma with a deathlike grip. It about breaks his heart when he has to send me my monthly allowance, and one reason why he put me here into this little school was because he thought it would be less expensive. Your people are different. You

always have money. They might have sent you to any big school if you'd insisted on it."

"I explained my mother's reason for wishing me to come here. After that exposure at Hadden Hall, it seemed best that I should put in a year at some obscure school before entering an institution of importance. You see, considering our standing and family, she felt fearfully cut up over what happened at Hadden. If there's a repetition of it here, it will make her hair turn gray. I may not betray my feelings to the extent that you do, but I'll confess that this miserable mix-up has got me going. If you hadn't struck that blow——"

"Oh, now you can't blame me; you'd done the same under those circumstances. What I'd like to know is where that extra ace came from. You don't suppose that sneak, Piper, slipped it into the pack, do you?"

Osgood shook his head. "I examined the cards after you fellows left. You know I stated at the time that I had two packs with the backs alike. Investigation showed me that the ace of

spades was missing from the pack that was not in use. It got into the other pack, somehow, and that's what makes me blame myself. You understand, Charley, that it was really through my own carelessness that this whole thing came about."

"It was rotten hard luck."

"Yes, it was hard luck."

Neither of them seemed to fancy for a moment that the element of Fate entered, even remotely, into the case, and perhaps they could be excused in this, for "hard luck" is ever the cry of the erring who face exposure through seemingly chance twists of circumstances. Even hardened malefactors, which these boys were not, rarely understand how closely the threads of human destiny are woven, making it almost impossible completely and effectually to hide the slightest flaw in the web.

Although Osgood invited him in when Mrs. Chester's house was reached, Shultz declined; he was troubled by a vague aversion for the room of his friend, in which an event bordering on

tragedy had taken place. They lingered outside near an old elm that was just beginning to show the least touch of tender green amid its branches, and continued seeking to ease their minds by talk.

"Under any circumstances," said Shultz, "this business seems to put the kibosh on our little plan. It's upset everything."

Osgood nodded. "Just when we had things pretty well fixed," he sighed. "We were standing in right with the majority of the baseball team, and Nelson's act at Wyndham would have helped us along."

"Sure. I'll guarantee you would have been captain of the Oakdale Academy nine before long. If Wyndham had won that game after Nelson benched us, it would have settled everything our way. You're mighty clever, old man. You worked the fellows who could be worked, and did it just right. They didn't realize for a moment what we were up to. Still, we had them sounded so that we knew which way every one would jump if a split came."

"It was your idea; I'd never thought of it myself. Even after seeing how loosely athletics are run here, being only a short time in the school, I wouldn't have fancied it possible to depose Nelson had you not suggested it."

For ten minutes or more they continued to talk without securing the least relief from the oppression and anxiety that was on them.

The face of Shultz, as he trudged toward the home of Caleb Carter, where he boarded, was clouded and gloomy. After supper he waited until the shadows had lengthened into twilight, and then set forth into the village. In their talk, neither he nor Osgood had spoken much of the probable result of Roy Hooker's injury, but Charley was inwardly consumed by a desire for some report on the unfortunate boy's condition.

In town he lingered around the postoffice and the stores where the villagers occasionally gathered to gossip, hoping to learn what he desired without making inquiries. He joined some boys near the drinking fountain in the square, but took little part in their characteristic chatter.

"You're glum to-night, Shultzie," said Hunk Rollins. "Got a grouch on?"

"Oh, no," was the answer. "I've had bad news from home. Father's sick, and I may have to give up school. It wouldn't surprise me to get a telegram to-morrow."

"Oh, gee!" cried Chub Tuttle. "Don't think you'll have to go for good, do you? With Hooker hurt and you gone, the nine will be mighty weak."

"Has any one heard anything from Hooker to-night?" Shultz desperately forced himself to inquire.

"Only that he seems to be about the same," answered Harry Hopper. "He hasn't talked much yet. We're all waiting to find out what he will have to say when he does talk. The old Prof seemed to think it was going to bump somebody. We've been trying to figure out who it will be. Fred Sage is Roy's closest friend, but he wasn't out of the house Saturday night, so he don't know anything about it."

"It wouldn't surprise me," said Shultz, "if the

whole thing turned out to be sort of a tempest in a teapot. It doesn't seem at all likely that anybody knows the facts and is keeping still. I'll wager Hooker took a tumble and hurt himself on his way home."

"But the question is, where had he been?" said Tuttle, munching a peanut. "He must have been out with somebody at that hour, but nobody has come forward to say he was with him. That's what makes it look suspicious."

"Well, I'm going home," announced Shultz, who had no relish to discuss the matter. "Perhaps we'll hear something new in the morning."

In his small back room at Caleb Carter's he tried to divert his mind a while by reading, but gave it up at last and decided to go to bed. He was half undressed when, chancing to turn toward the window, which looked out upon the roof of the ell, he staggered as if struck a blow, his mouth open, his eyes bulging, both hands outflung.

The light of his lamp, shining through the window, fell upon the pallid face of Roy Hooker, who was gazing fixedly at him!

CHAPTER XVII.

THE GREAT FEAR.

Aghast, his heart in his throat, Charley Shultz stared at the face outside the window. Only the upper part of the body of his unwelcome visitor could be seen, and that, clothed all in white, seemed particularly ghostlike. The head of the figure was encircled by a heavy white bandage, like a turban. The eyes which stared back at Shultz from an apparently set and pallid face were full of terrible accusation and menace, and beneath that unwavering gaze the terrified boy felt his blood turn to icy currents in his veins.

For a moment he stood spellbound and as motionless as the unmoving figure upon the roof of the ell. Presently, unable longer to endure the ordeal of those burning orbs, Shultz fell back a step, clapping a trembling hand over his own eyes.

He struck against the little stand on which his lamp stood, and the lamp was overturned. Fortunately, it was of metal, and did not break. The chimney, detaching itself, dropped upon a rug and was also unbroken. The burning wick continued to flare, sending up a writhing spiral of smoke, but the room was temporarily plunged into semi-gloom; and, still further terrified lest complete darkness should ensue, Charley stooped and caught up the lamp. He scarcely realized that he burned his quivering, nerveless fingers as he tried to replace the chimney. It was some moments ere he succeeded in his object, and even then, with the lamp gripped convulsively in his hand and held above his head, he could scarcely bring himself once more to look toward the window.

When he did look, he was astounded by the fact that the apparition had vanished, and for at least sixty seconds he stood watching for it to reappear; for it to materialize slowly and horribly, little by little, vague and mist-like at first, but gradually taking form and growing plainer,

until, crouching at the window, it should once more sicken his soul with those terrible eyes.

It did not come. Hoping at last that it was truly gone, he forced himself to advance, bearing the lamp. Reaching the window, he ran the roller shade to the very top, and then, still holding the lamp above his head with one hand while he shaded his eyes with the other, he gazed out into the silent night.

The lamplight showed that the roof of the ell was bare. At the far end of the building it fell upon a big chestnut tree with spreading branches. Beyond that nothing could be seen.

Presently, with a deep breath that was almost painful in the relief it gave, Shultz drew back from the window, seized the shade and quickly pulled it all the way down.

"Mercy! what a fright!" he whispered hoarsely. "I must have imagined it. My nerves must be on edge, and I never knew I had any nerves. Great Cæsar! but it did look natural and real!"

He put the lamp back on the stand and dropped upon a chair, weak and covered with clammy per-

spiration. For the first time in his life, perhaps, Charley Shultz had been thoroughly frightened, and it was no easy matter for him to recover and regain control of himself.

"I can hardly believe I imagined it, now!" he muttered. "Why should I? I haven't felt that I was really to blame for this Hooker business, and, if I'm not to blame, why should I get all wrought up over it?"

Up to this time his great concern had been almost wholly for himself as he would be affected by the unfortunate affair. In a slight measure he had regretted that Osgood would be entangled. Hooker had called him a cheat and had been the first to lift his hand in wrath. Therefore, why should he feel remorse over what the fellow had brought upon himself?

"He deserved all he got," Shultz had told himself this over and over. "Of course I didn't intend to give him a poke that would hurt him seriously, but I had to defend myself."

Now, however, something like a ray of light, piercing his distressed heart, showed him that

under the circumstances he could not hope wholly to escape just blame and censure. Although seemingly a bit stolid about ordinary affairs, he had always permitted his ungovernable temper and somewhat bullying proclivities to have full sway, and no person with a violent temper is totally phlegmatic or stolid. Rage and resentment had put power into the smashing blow which threatened him with disgrace—or worse.

“If only I hadn’t been quite so quick!” he sighed. “I didn’t realize what might come of it. I didn’t stop to think.” Which is the prime cause of most misfortunes we bring upon ourselves; we do not stop to think.

Rising, after a time, from the chair, he paced the floor of the little room, feeling that in his present condition it would be useless to go to bed; for sleep would be denied him. Back and forth he walked for a long time, his mind a riot of wild thoughts. Presently he stood still, breathing softly with his lips parted, his eyes wide and staring, yet seeing nothing in that room. A

dreadful thought had gripped him. What if Hooker were dead?

"Perhaps it was his ghost I really saw!" The words drifted so faintly from his lips that another person in the room could not have understood them. "It isn't impossible that he's dead! The doctor thought he'd get better, but doctors make mistakes. If he's dead I'm done for."

Scarcely realizing what he was doing, he flung on the garments he had removed some time before. And as he dressed he became more and more convinced that Roy Hooker was really dead.

"I'll have to get out of this town—quick. I'll pack up and get ready."

Forth from an adjoining closet he drew his trunk, into which he flung his belongings without method or care. A few things, such as he might need for immediate use, he packed into a leather grip.

"I can't get away till morning," he muttered; "there's no train. Still, I suppose I might hire a team from the stable. I might tell them I'd had a message that my father was dying. It's

thirty-four miles to Watertown on the main line, and there's a train goes through that place at four in the morning. I could catch that train, but, first, I'll make sure about Hooker."

Blowing out the lamp, he tiptoed down the dark stairs and presently found himself outside the house in which Mr. and Mrs. Carter were soundly sleeping. The air was raw and the night still dark. Later the moon would come up, though it might be smothered by clouds.

Shultz walked slowly, irresolutely, down the black road which led into Lake Street. After a time the academy loomed on his left, and on the right he saw the gymnasium and the fence of the athletic field. Like an avalanche a host of memories came rushing over him; memories of the days he had spent here since his expulsion from Berkley Academy.

For the first time he realized how pleasant those days had really been, and for the first time he perceived with wonderment that he had become attached to the place and it would give him regret to go away. Through his athletic prowess

and his skill in baseball he had won a certain amount of popularity, which might have been much greater if he had only made some effort to curb his unpleasant characteristics. Osgood, his friend, was immensely popular; so popular, indeed, that it had seemed probable that, through a little maneuvering and scheming, he might supersede Nelson as captain of the nine. Without a thought of the moral or manly points involved, they had plotted to bring this about.

"Well, it will never happen now," said Shultz, with a low, bitter laugh. "The jig is up, anyhow. I hardly thought Ned would agree when I proposed it, but he almost jumped at it. I believe he'd been thinking of the very same thing. There's class to his people, and he's a gentleman, so, when he did agree, it seemed all right to me." In this manner he sought to excuse himself.

He recalled how he had scoffed at Oakdale, the school and the old professor. He had even dreamed of resorting to various harassing methods in order to make Professor Richardson's task so difficult that, unable to govern his pupils with

a stern hand, he would withdraw from his position to let it be filled by a younger and more efficient instructor. Yes, having instilled some of his own spirit into his associates, Shultz had started a campaign of nagging and annoyance and disregard for what he called old-fashioned rules, which had certainly given the principal no small amount of worry and trouble.

"I suppose," he half laughed, as he walked slowly past the building, "the old relic thinks I'm a bad egg. What do I care what he thinks! What do I care what anybody thinks!" But for the first time in his life he did care.

At this hour the center of the village seemed dark and deserted. Only an occasional light was to be seen shining dimly from a window. Nevertheless, the boy hesitated about passing through the square, fearing that some one might see him, know him, and wonder what he was doing prowling about so late. This fear led him to turn from Lake Street and cross lots toward the rapids below the upper dam. In this manner he stole down the slope at the rear of the stores and houses

which lined the western side of lower Main Street.

The water was gurgling and grumbling around the rocks which thrust themselves upward in the channel. At intervals, as Shultz passed, it hissed, like a living creature expressing scorn and hatred.

At the bridge he climbed upward to the roadway, where he stood for a few moments, peering and listening.

"I seem to be the only one alive in this old burg." The thought brought Hooker to his mind—Hooker, dead, perhaps.

Cross Street, which ran back of the town hall and along the shore of the lower pond, would bring him into Lake Street again, near Willow, upon which was the home of the Hookers. He had almost reached Lake Street when he stopped short, halted by the sound of echoing footsteps, which were approaching from that part of the town he had avoided. In a moment he was pressing his body against the bole of a big tree.

The footsteps came nearer. The person began

to hum a tune. Here was some one abroad with a light heart and fearless of observation.

"It must be Tuttle," thought the boy by the tree. "Yes, it is. Why don't he let his eternal peanuts stop his mouth?"

Chub Tuttle passed on the opposite side of the way, and, ceasing to hum as he trudged serenely homeward, began to whistle not unmelodiously. The notes of "The Last Rose of Summer" came drifting back to the ears of Charley Shultz, growing fainter and fainter in the distance and sounding inexpressibly sad.

Shultz thought it must be getting darker, and was amazed, on rubbing them, to find that his eyes were moist and blurred. He leaned against the tree and listened, almost against his will, as the whistling grew fainter and yet fainter, softened and sweetened by the distance. When he could hear it no longer he gave himself a savage shake.

"You fool!" he rasped. "What's the matter with you? You never felt like this before. You're growing silly."

Reaching Willow Street, he gazed toward Hooker's home, but, even had the darkness not prevented him from seeing the house, it stood so far back on the Middle Street corner that he could not have surveyed it from his present position. Dread heavily upon him, yet hope not entirely dead, he walked slowly up the street. He had almost reached the corner when he stopped again.

He could see the house now, and his heart hammered furiously as he perceived that something was taking place there. There were lights flashing from room to room; he heard excited voices calling; the house was in a commotion.

"What's that mean? What's that mean?" whispered Shultz over and over.

Suddenly the door of the house was flung open. A man came running out, some one calling after him. Down the steps he sprang; across Lake Street he dashed; along Middle Street he raced.

Panting, one hand clutching a nearby fence-railing, Shultz was certain he knew the cause of

this commotion. Mr. Hooker was running for the doctor. They had just discovered that Roy was dead.

Turning sharply about, Schultz ran also.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FLIGHT.

As he ran, the terrible fear that had clung to him grew to gigantic proportions. Panting and gasping, he exerted every effort in that first burst of speed. The sound of his flying feet echoed through the silent streets, and those echoes, flung back to his ears, made it seem that a part of the sound was produced by other feet than his own. It seemed that there was a fearsome pursuer at his very heels, reaching for him with eager, claw-like hands. He dared not pause an instant in his flight to look back. On and on he ran, down through Cross Street, retracing his course up the slope to Lake Street, and still on past the silent and gloomy academy.

From exhaustion and lack of breath his pace had slackened perforce. In all his experience in athletics, never before had he exerted himself until, the breath wholly pumped from his lungs, he

could only gasp in exquisite pain, while his very head threatened to burst.

At length, just beyond the academy, he stumbled and fell. Half stunned by the shock, he fully expected to feel himself pounced upon by that unknown pursuer.

Recovering, he looked around as he struggled to his feet. He was quite alone; he could see no moving, living object.

"Still," he thought, as he stood gulping in air to relieve his collapsed lungs, "I could swear something chased me. It was right behind me all the way. I couldn't see it, but I could feel it. If it's that sort of a thing, it's no use to run; I can't run away from it."

But when he started on again the fear returned, and it was only by the most tremendous effort that he restrained the impulse to resume running. Every moment or two he looked back, and sometimes he stopped and turned squarely in his tracks.

His relief was great when he saw, near at hand, the house where he boarded. He would

get inside, close the door quickly behind him, and shut the unseen pursuer out.

But the door did not open beneath his hand. He tried it again and again, presently realizing with dismay that he had failed to fasten back the catch of the spring lock when he came out. Yesterday, in changing his clothes, he had discovered that his latch key was missing. Search for it had been vain, and Mrs. Carter had not been able to furnish another key.

"Well, this is a fix!" he whispered. "I'm locked out. I don't want to rap and get them up, for I would have to explain. Then, too, if they got a look at me they'd know there's something wrong. I must show it plain enough."

He walked silently around to the rear of the house. There was the ell, upon the roof of which his window opened, and close to the end of the ell stood the chestnut tree, with one stout branch projecting over the roof. He thought of climbing the tree, reaching the roof by means of that limb, and crawling along to obtain admittance through the window of his chamber.

Remembering the fearsome spectacle revealed to him outside that window this very night, he faltered and drew back. He was terrified lest, having climbed to the roof, he should find himself once more face to face with the apparition.

"It's no use," he almost sobbed; "I can't do it! Anyhow, why should I wish to get in there? If it's a ghost, I couldn't shut it out. I may need the things in my bag; I'd certainly like to have them; but I must do without them."

He knew that a hostler slept all night in Hyde's livery stable, and that there was a bell by which the man might be aroused. Now, however, for the first time it occurred to him that he lacked money. Having paid Osgood a small debt, less than three dollars remained in his pocket. It was thirty-four miles to Watertown, and it would require many times three dollars to pay for a rig to carry him there.

"Perhaps they'll trust me," he muttered. "I'll tell a good story. I'll make it out a case of life or death—and perhaps it is."

Then something seemed to whisper in his ear

that he could not endure the scrutiny of any one without betraying himself. Furthermore, if he should hire a rig and a man to drive him to Watertown, that would betray the direction of his flight. Should they desire to stop him and bring him back, the telephone would serve them well.

"I'm done for," he groaned—"done for! I don't know what to do."

Desiring sympathy, longing for advice, he thought of Osgood, and at once he decided that Ned ought to know without delay what had happened.

Crossing lots and open fields, he avoided the streets of the town as far as possible. He was still pursued by the conviction that some unseen thing was following him, but with set teeth, he restrained the desire to run, holding himself down to a sharp, jerky walk, which was interrupted occasionally as he looked back. Finally he saw before him the big white two-story house of Mrs. Chester.

Now another problem arose, how to reach Osgood. If he rang at the door he would eventu-

ally bring either the maid or Mrs. Chester to answer the bell. What could he tell them?

"I know what I'll do," he decided, stooping to run the palm of his hand over the loose earth of the street bed.

It did not take him long to gather up a handful of small pebbles, and with these he approached the house. One after another he flung them upward and heard them clink against the window glass, but he used them all without perceiving a token that he had awakened Osgood. The house remained dark and silent. A rising breeze caused the limbs of some trees to knock together; it swept Shultz's clammy cheek and made him shiver.

"I must get Ned up," he muttered. "Fool that I am, I've been trying the wrong window. He's in his bedroom, of course, and the window to that is on the side of the house."

Back to the street he went for more pebbles. He was crouching froglike, feeling for them with his hands, when he heard a sound that turned him rigid for an instant.

Footsteps were approaching on the sidewalk; some one was coming up the street. Why should any one in that sleepy, well-behaved little town be out at this hour? Was it possible they had already begun searching for him?

Then he heard voices. There were two persons approaching.

Rising to a crouching position, he ran to the fence across the way from Mrs. Chester's and flung himself over. And, again started in flight, the terror that had driven him in the first place came back with additional force; and this was augmented by the sound of voices shouting after him—the voices of the two men on the street, who had seen his shadowy figure as he vaulted the fence.

"There he is!" "That's him!" "There he goes!" "Stop! stop!"

Crying after him in this manner, they came on in pursuit. Venturing to look back, he saw them tumbling over the fence he had leaped, and once more he strained every nerve.

There was now no doubt in his mind; they

were after him. Perhaps before the coming of the end Roy Hooker's mind had cleared sufficiently for him to tell who struck the fatal blow. Perhaps Roy's father, running from the house, had been hurrying to set the officers at work.

In advance, he perceived a dark, straggling line of bushes and low trees. Amid them he turned sharply to the left, hoping somehow to double on his tracks and baffle the pursuers. Through a thicket of shrubbery he plunged, with the tiny branches viciously whipping his face and tearing at his clothes, as if even they sought to grasp and hold him.

Suddenly he stopped short, his mouth wide open, that he might listen the better. The two men had reached the growth, and he could hear them floundering amid it.

"This way!" one of them cried. "He went this way!"

"Keep still!" urged the other. "We ought to be able to hear him. Keep still a minute."

The crashing sounds ceased, and the listening boy knew the men were listening also. Through

a great effort of self-command, he kept himself from resuming the flight, waiting until the noise of their own movements should prevent them from hearing what sounds he might make.

They soon grew impatient and began beating about in the underbrush in an aimless search.

As soon as this happened Shultz moved away, proceeding with a certain amount of caution. Keeping just within the border of the timber and thickets, he went forward as fast as he dared, putting out his hands to part the bushes and slipping through them as silently as possible. At times twigs snapped beneath his feet, but, as he had hoped, the men were themselves making sufficient noise to drown such minor sounds, and gradually he left them far behind.

In the blackness he ran full against a wire fence, and the barbs of the lower strands slashed his trousers and cut his legs. He tore himself free, felt for the smooth upper strand, bent it downward and straddled over.

Following the line of the fence, he turned full upon the course he had been pursuing when he

plunged into the timber. Leaving that shelter behind him, bending low, he ran on until he returned to the highway some distance above the home of Mrs. Chester. In the middle of the road he paused uncertainly.

The moon was rising. Its light, although somewhat muffled by the clouds, was sufficient to enable him to perceive the outlines of objects at a considerable distance; it would also reveal him far better to pursuers, and make his escape more difficult were he again seen by them.

"Good-by, Ned," he whispered. "You're asleep, and you don't know anything about it. Probably you'll never realize just what I've had to go through this night."

Fearing to follow the highway, he again struck across the fields, before him the deep stretch of timberland to the north of Turkey Hill. By making his way through those woods and passing round the hill, he could reach the Barville road some miles from Oakdale.

At the edge of the timber the night wind bore to his ears a sound that again halted him

dead in his tracks. The bells of Oakdale were ringing—ringing wildly, furiously, as they might ring to arouse the villagers to battle with a conflagration. Peal upon peal vibrated through the night air, and their clanging strokes stabbed the miserable boy like dagger thrusts.

“I know what it means!” he half panted, half sobbed. “They’re turning the whole town out to hunt me down! I’m alone, alone, with everybody against me! What chance have I got? Well, they’ll have to catch me before I give up.”

The woods swallowed him; he was gone. The bells continued to fling forth their wild alarm. As if wondering at it, and curious to know what it was all about, the silvery moon peered through a break in the clouds, flooding the open space with its light.

But in the woods through which Charley Shultz staggered on it was dark. In his heart it was darker still.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE APPARITION IN THE WOODS.

In the midst of the woods Shultz stopped to rest, seating himself upon a log against which he had stumbled. The clouds having dispersed, the moon was silvering the tree-tops above his head, but it had not yet risen high enough to cast its light upon the ground of the little glade. On every hand were the mysterious night shadows of the woods.

The boy's legs quivered as he sat there, grateful for this respite, although he felt that time was precious and he should waste no moments. No longer could he hear the village bells; they had ceased to ring, and he was glad of that.

It was a melancholy and terrible thing to feel himself an outcast and a fugitive from justice, practically with the hand of mankind in general turned against him. He had read stories of dar-

ing fugitives in similar positions, and always the fugitives had seemed enfolded by a glamor of romance, which had almost made him long to pass through such an experience; but, now that the experience was his, it held no glamor, no single feature of allurement or romance. It was simply a horrible situation, to be freed from which he felt that he would willingly give up years of his life.

That he could escape, he still had a faint hope; but it was faint indeed, and, had he heeded sober judgment, he would have put it aside as something false and deceptive and merely adding to his suspense and torture. With the telephone and telegraph, the surrounding country could be warned and every loophole stopped. With the bulk of the villagers searching for him, it was simply a matter of time before he would be run down.

"I'll never give up," he kept telling himself; "I'll never give up till they catch me."

He had always thought of the night woods at this season of the year as silent and lifeless.

Now, however, resting upon that log, he became aware of many strange sounds all around him. There seemed to be faint rustlings and whisperings, as if the very trees were telling one another that he was there, and pointing him out with their bare, extending arms. Continually he kept turning his head to look first in one direction and then in another. Several times he was startled by shadows that seemed to move, but when he watched them more closely they were motionless enough.

Nevertheless, the fancy that something was drawing nearer, creeping upon him bit by bit, increased with the passing moments. He could feel it approaching silently, stealthily, steadily. He had escaped the two men who had tried to run him down, but there was something he could not escape, and, recalling what he had beheld through the window of his chamber, he leaped up and resumed his reckless flight.

This way and that he turned and darted to avoid the trees and the denser thickets. The woods seemed endless. Long ere this, he told

himself, he should have passed through them and reached the Barville road.

Presently before him the moonlight showed a broad open space, and with a gasp of thankfulness he tottered forth from the forest. His clothes were in tatters. There was blood on his legs from the wounds inflicted by the barbed wire fence. His hands and his face were scratched and bruised. Seeing him now, a stranger must surely have wondered with curiosity to know what had brought him to such a pitiful plight.

But the woods, they were behind him. The Barville road must be near at hand. Not far away the moonlight showed him an orchard and some buildings.

He stopped, stood still, gazed at those buildings. There was something familiar about them. Farther away, to the right, he could see more houses.

"Where am I?" he muttered hoarsely. "So help me, that looks like Sage's home! It is! it

is! I got turned round in the woods. I've come straight back to the place where I entered."

This was true. The houses down the road were the scattering ones upon the outskirts of the village.

Sickened by this discovery, Shultz remained some moments in doubt and uncertainty. Here and there he could see lights in the windows of the houses. All Oakdale seemed awake. The bells had aroused the village, and everywhere posses of men were searching. Should he attempt to follow along the edge of the woods and pass round Turkey Hill to the south, it would bring him dangerously near town.

"My only safety lies in the woods until I can get farther away," he decided. "I can get through them all right if I keep my head. With the moon on my back, the shadows will guide me. I can get my bearings in every little open space. I'll do it."

Setting his teeth, he turned about and again plunged into the timber. Precious time had been lost through his blunder, but now, he told him-

self, he would master his fears and make no false steps.

In time he came to an opening in the midst of the woods, where the moonlight fell upon the cleared ground. Half-way across this opening dread of the gloom at the far side made him falter. Again he was oppressed by the conviction that something terrible and uncanny had followed him in all his flight. Again he could feel it drawing nearer and nearer. Something like the sound of soft footsteps caused his heart to choke him, and, turning, he saw it coming.

In the shadows an object advanced. It was like a human body, white from the waist upward, and this white portion, which he could plainly see, seemed to float in the air.

But when the shadows were passed and it stepped forth into the moonlight, he perceived that the body was supported by legs encased in dark trousers. The moonlight revealed more than that. He was looking into the face of Roy Hooker! Even as Roy's eyes had stared at him through the window of his chamber, they were

now fastened upon him. Above those staring eyes, the turban-like bandage of white still encircled Hooker's head.

"Hooker!" groaned Shultz. "Oh, Hooker, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to do it!"

The figure halted ten feet away. A hand was uplifted and extended accusingly. A voice—the voice of Hooker—demanded:

"Shultz, where did that other ace come from?"

The words sounded in a low, monotonous, dead-level tone. To Shultz, the voice seemed hollow and lifeless, like the voice of the dead.

He could not answer, but, flinging off the benumbing spell that had chained him in his tracks, he whirled and fled again. Through the woods he crashed and plunged like mad, almost blind with terror. Again and again he half collided with trees. Vines and low branches tripped him. Falling, he scrambled up and ran on, absolutely heedless of what course he followed.

In this manner he plunged at last into a deep gully. As he fell he tried to leap, and down he went in an upright position. When he struck

the bottom, one foot twisted beneath him, and he dropped in a heap. A pain shot through his leg.

Getting his breath after the shock, he started to rise; but the moment he tried to bear his weight on his right foot the pain jabbed him frightfully, and he toppled over.

"My leg is broken!" he sobbed. "Now I'm done for, sure!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE SEARCH.

In the midst of troublesome dreams, Ned Osgood, half-awake, fancied he heard hail beating against the windows of his sitting room. Fully awake at last, he lifted his head from the pillow and listened; but, hearing it no more, he decided that it must have been a figment of his distasteful dreams.

He heard something else, however. Far away the voices of men were calling, but as he listened and wondered, the sounds grew more distant, became fainter, and died away.

Returning to his pillow, he settled down, seeking to compose himself, and praying that those rest-disturbing dreams might trouble him no more. But thoughts of Hooker would not let him sleep, and presently something else brought him bolt upright on the bed, startled and wondering.

It was a clamor of bells, beginning with a peal from the steeple of the Methodist church down the street. The night air vibrated with the sounds, which seemed to pour in upon him through the partly opened window of his bedroom. Why were those church bells ringing at such an hour? He could distinguish the tones of the academy bell, as well. In a moment he knew it must be an alarm meant to arouse the town, and out of bed he sprang, catching his trousers up from the back of a chair and getting into them as quickly as he could, trembling slightly all the while with excitement.

Below he heard Mrs. Chester calling to the maid, and, opening the door of his room, her words came plainly to his ears:

"Sarah! Sarah! Get up quick! I'm frightened. There must be a big fire. The bells are ringing."

"So that's it," muttered Osgood, hastening to a window. "There's a fire in the village. They sound the bells to give the alarm."

Looking from the window, he failed to observe

any glow of light against the sky to indicate where the fire might be. Through a momentary lull of the bells, he fancied he heard some one shouting far away in town. Surely some terrible thing had happened or was taking place.

Lighting a lamp, he rapidly finished dressing, and pulling on his turtle-neck sweater he grabbed up his cap.

As he bounded down the stairs, Mrs. Chester called to him from a partly opened door at the end of the hall:

"Where is it, Ned? Where's the fire?"

"I don't know," he answered. "I looked out, but I couldn't see any fire. Don't be alarmed; it must be a long distance away, in another part of the village."

A man was running down the middle of the street as Osgood dashed from the house, slamming the door behind him. He called to the man, but received no answer. Then he took to the street and followed.

The bell in the Methodist steeple hammered and banged as he raced past the church. Lights

were shining everywhere from the windows of houses. Men and boys came running from side streets, questioning one another excitedly without getting satisfactory answers.

There was a crowd in the village square, and, contrasted with the agitated people who came running to join it from every direction, it was strangely calm.

Ned grabbed some one by the arm, as he demanded:

"What is it? What's the matter? Why are they ringing the bells?"

He recognized Jack Nelson, as the person he had questioned turned to answer.

"It's Hooker!"

"Hooker!" choked Osgood, aghast.

A fearsome thought smote him. Hooker was dead! But why should they ring the bells in the middle of the night and bring all the people out?

"Yes," Nelson was saying, "Roy has disappeared. He was left, apparently asleep, and later,

when some one looked into his room, he was gone."

"Great Scott!" breathed Ned. "I thought perhaps he was dead."

"Oh, no. In that case, it wouldn't be necessary to turn the whole village out. He's wandering around somewhere, half dressed and probably crazy. They're getting the people out to search for him."

"Is it necessary to turn out the whole town this way?"

"Perhaps so. They've tried to find him, but can't. Now they're asking everybody to join in the search. You see, there's no telling what the result may be if he's not found soon. In his dotty condition he may do himself harm; and, anyhow, with only a few clothes on, he's liable to get pneumonia."

Some of the men who had early learned the cause of the disturbance were now seen bringing lanterns, and in the midst of the gathering in the square, William Pickle, the deputy sheriff, was suggesting a plan of search, by which four

parties should spread out in different directions.

"You want to look everywhere, feller citizens," the officer was saying; "look into sheds and barns and under fences, and every old nook and corner where the boy may be hidin'. He's plumb loony, ye know, and he's li'ble to crawl into any old place. Mebbe he'll be scat of ye and want to fight when ye do find him, so handle him gentle."

At this juncture two men came panting down Main Street. "We know where he is!" shouted one. "We've seen him!"

"Yep, we've seen him," gulped the other. "We almost ketched him, but he got away from us somehow."

"Where is he? Where is he?" cried twenty voices.

"We was goin' up the street, lookin' for him, and we'd almost got to the Widder Chester's, when we see somebody scoot across the road, jump the fence and put off inter the field above Cedar Street. When we hollered for him to stop he run faster."

"And he could run some," gasped the smaller man. "We chased him into a strip of trees and bushes, and he must be hid there right now, for we couldn't find him."

"Come on," commanded William Pickle, taking the lead—"come on, everybody. Show us the way, Turner and Crabtree."

Forgetting the original plan of search, the crowd poured up the main street, straggling out into a long, irregular body. Osgood, keeping close to the leaders, felt some one press against him, and recognized Billy Piper.

"This is bad business," said Piper in a low tone.

"You're right," agreed Ned instantly. "No one can feel any worse about it than I do."

"But feeling bad," retorted Billy grimly, "doesn't make amends; it's got to be something more than that."

As the searchers turned from the road near Mrs. Chester's house, climbed the fence and streamed across the field, Ned began to understand that the shouting, which had seemed to

break in upon his troubled dreams, had been real. And with this conviction came the thought that in his delirium Hooker had sought to return to the place where he had been injured. It was a disagreeable thought, which Osgood tried to put aside.

The rising moon, breaking now and then through ragged clouds, promised aid to the searchers. Directed by Pickle, they spread out and practically surrounded the long, narrow strip of trees and bushes. This done, a body of men entered the growth and worked their way through it, leaving scarcely a yard of ground uninspected. But when they had passed over it all in this thorough manner, it became known that not one of them had found the slightest trace of the missing lad.

"He must have hid till Turner and Crabtree left," said the deputy sheriff. "As soon as they were gone, he prob'ly hit out for somewhere's else."

"Too bad one of 'em didn't have sense enough

to stay and watch while t'other one went for help," said Abel Hubbard, the constable.

The posse gathered in a group, seeking further instructions from their leaders.

Don't believe they'll ever find him this way," said Billy Piper. "They're not going about it with any sort of method."

"Yeou're so all-fired clever at sech things," said Sile Crane, "why don't yeou suggest a plan?"

"They wouldn't listen to me if I proposed anything."

"If you have a plan, Piper," said Nelson, joining the little cluster of boys that surrounded Billy, "just tell us what it is. If it sounds reasonable, we'll carry it out."

"Let me think a moment—let me think," said Piper, tapping his knuckles against his forehead. "The report is that Roy was talking some along about nightfall, though his words were jumbled, without much sense in them. He kept repeating certain things, such as 'poker,' 'five aces,' and 'cabin.'"

"You know what Professor Richardson said," put in Rodney Grant. "It's thought that Roy was playing cards for money when he was hurt."

"If so," said Billy, "that would explain the words 'poker' and 'five aces'; but why did he keep talking about a cabin? Ha! I have it. I happen to know that once on a time a certain little bunch of fellows went over to the old camp in Silver Brook Swamp to play poker, and Hook was one of the crowd. Cabin—that's what he meant; he had something in his muddled mind about that old camp in the swamp. Come on, fellows, perhaps we'll find him there."

"You've always been so lucky in your guesses," said Nelson, "that there's a chance you may be right this time. If you should happen to be, your reputation as a great detective will be established on a firm——"

"I don't want any such reputation!" snapped Billy shortly. "I think I told you so once before, Jack."

"Geewhilikens!" exclaimed Crane, astonished. "What's happened to yeou naow? Yeou've al-

wus been red-hot to play the detective, and some folks have begun to say that yeou're purty clever at it."

"I haven't time to explain my reasons for cutting that tommyrot out," retorted Piper. "Let's get a move on."

There were eight boys in the party that set out for Silver Brook Swamp, led by Piper. Striking across the fields, they passed to the south of Turkey Hill and reached the Barville road. The clouds were dispersing and the moon was shining clear and bright when they drew near Silver Brook and came to the old path that led into the swamp.

Phil Springer and Chipper Cooper were disposed to lag behind somewhat, although something seemed to draw them on after the others.

"I've been expecting Piper to blow the whole thing any minute," said Cooper, speaking to Phil in a low tone.

"Wonder why he hasn't?" speculated Springer.

"He sus-swore to us that he would if Shultz or Osgood didn't own up pup-pretty quick."

"Guess he's waiting for what he'd call the psychological moment. You know Pipe's always great for dramatic effects."

"There can be only one outcome to this thing now. We're all in the sus-sus-soup."

"Billy says it's our duty to think of Roy, not ourselves."

"I've been th-thinking of him too much. It's made me sick. I'm thinking of him now, and what we're liable to fuf-find in this old swamp if Pipe's guess is right about the way he went. Being crazy enough to jump out of bub-bed and run off half-dressed, anything may huh-happen to him."

"That's right," agreed Chipper dolefully. "I wonder where Charley Shultz is? Didn't see anything of him with the crowd."

"Yah!" growled Springer. "He hasn't got any fuf-feelings. I'll bet he's in bed, sleeping like a log, this very minute. Probably not even the ringing of the bells woke him up."

"He must have a heart of stone," said Cooper.

Had they known all that had happened to Shultz in the last two hours, could they have seen him in his present painful and wretched condition, their judgment of him might not have been so harsh.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CAMP ON THE ISLAND.

Under the western shoulder of Turkey Hill the shadows were deep and heavy, and, the path being dim and faint from rare use, it was necessary for the party to proceed slowly. They did not talk much, and when they did speak their words were uttered in low and guarded tones.

Several times, Piper, in the lead, paused to make sure they had not wandered from the right course. The others seemed to rely almost wholly upon Billy, and no one thought of superseding him in the leadership. During one of these pauses, Cooper, who had halted with Springer a short distance behind the others, pulled at Phil's sleeve and whispered in his ear:

"Say, old man, don't you think it's about time we told all we know about this business?"

Springer gave his body a queer sort of a shake.

"What gug-good will that do?" he whispered back. "It won't help fuf-find Hooker."

"No, but it may help us after he's found."

"I don't think so; it's tut-too late."

"Why too late?" persisted Chipper.

"Because everybub-bub-body would know we were just scared into it, that's all. It wouldn't help us a bit, Chip—not a bit, to tell it now. If Piper thought it would do any good you bub-bet your life he'd have told already."

"Perhaps you're right," sighed Cooper; "but it's an awful load on my conscience, and I'd like to get it off my system."

"Come on," Piper called back in a low tone. "We're all right. This is the way."

They went forward again, turning presently to the left and descending to the lower ground at the border of the broad marsh. The trees became more scattering and the thickets grew thinner. Before long they saw the marsh, spreading out before them, silent and strange and uninviting in the moonlight which flooded its expanse of pools and reeds and brushwood, amid

which a few scraggy dead trees rose here and there. In the midst of the expanse was a bit of higher ground, covered by a growth of small, dark, evergreen trees. This was the "island" on which stood the old camp where Piper hoped to find Roy Hooker. From knoll to knoll, in a zigzag course, led the path, the pools and marshy places bridged by felled trees and brushwood.

"I'm afraid you won't find him there, Piper," said Nelson.

Cooper, hearing the words, muttered for Springer's ear:

"I'm afraid we will."

Despite their caution in proceeding, at one point, Grant, breaking through the brushwood bridge with a cracking sound, plunged one leg to the thigh between the two lengthwise supports and drew it forth soaking wet.

"This yere trail," said the Texan, "is sure some unreliable and treacherous."

Those who reached the island first waited for the others to come up. They stood there whispering and listening, but hearing no sounds to

assure them that the one they sought was near.

"As he's deranged," said Piper, "we want to take care not to frighten him more than possible, for it's likely he'll be scared and run when he sees us."

"He can't run fur," declared Crane, "without plungin' head over heels right into the swamp."

"And that's what we don't want him to do; it might be his finish. We must prevent him from running away when we find him."

"When we find him," muttered Nelson. "But something tells me we won't find him here."

Slowly they pushed forward toward the center of the island. In a few moments they came to a small opening and paused again, before them the old camp huddling in the shadows of a thick grove which rose close beside it. The place was dolefully silent and forbidding at that hour. A breath of wind, sweeping across the island, set up a sudden rustling, which was accompanied by a sound that put their nerves on edge.

That sound was like a low, harsh moan or groan, and it seemed to come from the sagging,

deserted camp before them. Some shrank back shivering, while others appeared eager to rush forward.

"He's there!" breathed Nelson. "That must be he!"

Springer stooped and placed his lips close to Cooper's ear:

"Sus-sus-sounded to me like sus-sus-some one dying," he chattered.

"Let the others go ahead," gasped Cooper. "I don't want to find him first. I don't want to see him. I'd like to get away this minute."

With his arm outstretched and the palm of his hand turned backward to restrain his companions, Billy Piper advanced swiftly on his toes. Within a few feet of the shanty structure, he saw that the door was standing open. At that moment another gust of wind rustled through the trees, and immediately the harsh moaning sound was repeated.

"It's the door," declared Billy, enlightened. "The wind moves it and makes the old hinges creak."

"My Jinks!" mumbled Crane, in great relief. "I thought it must be him sure; I thought it was Roy. Mercy! I'm all ashake."

Stepping boldly to the black doorway, Piper struck a match, but a gust of wind extinguished it. Immediately he lighted a second match, shielding the tiny blaze with his cupped hands. Close behind him crowded the others, seeking to look over his shoulders into the camp when the blaze should be sufficient to reveal the interior of the place.

Having protected the match until it burned brightly, Billy held it out before him and slightly above his head, shifting his curved hands until they served as a reflector for the tiny flaring light.

The shanty contained only one room, which seemed to be quite empty and deserted, save for an old broken table and a few crude pieces of furniture. There were shadows in the corners, but none of these seemed sufficient to hide a human being.

The flame scorched Billy's fingers, and he

dropped the match, which, a bent and glowing coal, floated zigzagging and spiraling downward, burst into bits as it struck, and died out.

Some one behind Piper drew a long breath. "I don't reckon he's here, after all," said the voice of Grant.

"There's something white lying on the floor," declared Billy, with suppressed excitement. "I saw it just as I dropped the match."

Lighting another, he stepped forward and picked the thing up. It was a damp cloth, and with it in his hand he retreated into the moonlight outside.

"What is it? What is it?" questioned the boys, pressing around him.

Billy held it up. "Looks to me like a wet towel that had been wound round something and fastened into place with safety pins," he said. "That's what it is, too. Fellows, Hooker may not be here now, but he has been here—he certainly has. This proves it."

"How do you make that out?" asked Osgood,

doing his best to appear as calm as would seem consistent.

"This towel proves it," reiterated Piper. "It couldn't come here without being brought, could it?"

"No; but I don't see——"

"It's wet. It's the very towel that was used to hold the ice compress on Roy's head."

"If that's right," said Nelson swiftly, "he must be near. Perhaps he's hiding close by in the bushes. We must search every foot of this island."

"Every inch of it," agreed Piper, "and we want to be about it right away. Let's fall back to the place where we came on, and begin there. We must spread out and then advance together. There must be some system about it."

Following his directions, they began the search on the island. It was dark, pokey work in the midst of the thicker growths, but, nevertheless, they did it with an amount of thoroughness that made it seem impossible for them to overlook a person seeking to hide on that small patch of dry

land. Yet, when they had covered it all and reached the western side beyond which the swamp lay impassable for a person afoot, they had found no additional token of Hooker.

"Too bad," said Nelson, discouraged. "He isn't here. He can't be here."

"It doesn't seem possible," admitted Piper, "yet this towel is sure evidence that he has been here."

"He must have gone away before we came," was Osgood's opinion. "I don't believe he could have dodged us after we got on to the island."

Almost with one accord, they turned to Piper.

"What be we goin' to do next, Billy?" asked Crane.

"Let's take one more look into that old camp," suggested the leader, who, although he did not admit it, was almost at his wit's end. "I know where there's an old pitch-pine log, and we ought to get a piece of that to serve as a torch."

The log, which had been partly hacked up for firewood, was found, and a slender resinous strip was torn from it. Lighting one end of this strip

of wood, Piper fanned it into a bright flame, and, bearing it in his hand, boldly entered the shanty.

The torch revealed nothing they had not previously seen, but it did give them complete assurance that the boy they sought could not be hiding there.

"Yes, he got away, that's sure," said Nelson; "and there's only one way by which he could do it. He had to go back as he came."

"And therefore," said Billy quickly, "he must be in the woods somewhere yonder. That's where we should look for him now."

"Perhaps," ventured Crane, "he's near enough to hear us. Oh, Hooker! Hey, Roy!"

Piper sprang at him savagely. "Stop that, you idiot!" he snarled. "Stop shouting that way! What are you trying to do?"

"Why, I thought he might hear me."

"Yes, he might and be frightened into fits. No more of that fool business, Sile. Keep still and come on. We'll get off right away and do the best we can hunting for him over yonder."

Over the treacherous crossing they returned to the solid ground beyond the border of the swamp. Looking backward, Cooper tugged at Springer's sleeve.

"Now I'm afraid we *won't* find him, Phil," he confessed. "I'm afraid nobody will find him tonight. And when they do, it wouldn't surprise me if they dug his body out of this old swamp."

CHAPTER XXII.

A SURPRISING CONFESSION.

After a time Osgood and Nelson became separated from the rest of the searchers. They had come to a little opening where the moonlight shone upon a small pile of cord-wood that had been cut and left there during the past winter, and here they stopped and faced each other.

"It's worse than useless, this searching without lights of any sort save what the moon affords," said Jack. "There are thousands of places where one could hide from searchers if he chose. It would be better to go through the woods calling to Hooker and assuring him we are friends."

"I doubt," returned Ned, "if we'd find him then."

"What do you suppose has become of him?"

"You can answer that question fully as well as I."

"Well, then," said Jack suddenly, "what do you suppose was the cause of all this trouble, anyhow? How was Hooker hurt?"

Osgood's answer was a shrug. Motioning toward two short stumps which stood nearby, he suggested that they should sit down.

"I want to talk to you, Nelson," he said, when they were seated. "I've got to talk to some one, and I'd rather it would be you than any one else. We've never been what might be called real friendly, have we?"

Surprised and wondering at his companion's words and singular manner, Nelson replied:

"I don't know that we've been exactly chummy, but——"

"Tell the truth," interrupted Osgood, reaching out and putting his hand on the other boy's knee. "We haven't been even friendly, although you seemed willing enough to be, and I've put up a bluff that I was. All the same, you didn't trust me. You knew I was bluffing."

"I—I don't think—that I—actually knew it," stammered Nelson, still more astonished.

Osgood threw back his head and smiled. The moonlight, full on his rather handsome, aristocratic face, showed that smile to be touched with bitterness, even with self-scorn.

"I'm a bluffer, Nelson—a thoroughbred bluffer," he declared. "Intuition told you as much. All along I knew you were one fellow in Oakdale that I had not fully blinded. Piper, with all his natural shrewdness—and we'll admit that he's naturally shrewd—was deceived in me."

"What are you talking about, Osgood?" exclaimed Jack. "Why are you telling me this stuff, anyhow?"

"I don't know just why, but I'm telling it to relieve my mind. Perhaps it will relieve me in a measure, anyhow. I had no thought in the world of talking to you this way when we paused here a few moments ago, but suddenly an irresistible impulse came upon me. Something seemed to say, 'You may as well tell him, for he sees through you, anyhow.' Do you know, Nelson, I've hated you. Yes, that's the word. I hated you because I couldn't deceive you, and

that's why I longed to do something to hurt you."

"You what? Of course I know I benched you in that Wyndham game, but I had——"

"You should have benched me before," exclaimed Osgood. "You should have fired me from the nine."

"Fired you? Why, you were one of our best players. You really knew more baseball than any one else on the team. You were valuable."

"Even if I could play better baseball than Hans Wagner himself, I was a bad man to have on the team, for I was trying to create insubordination, distrust and a disbelief in your ability as captain."

"I—I knew Shultz was ready to kick against my authority at any provocation," said Nelson, bewildered; "but you always seemed so decent and——"

"Shultz!" exploded Osgood. "Why, he was simply carrying out my scheme. I let him think it was mainly his idea, but all the time it was mine. I fooled him, just the same as I did the

others. When I perceived that you did not trust me, and when I became convinced that you thought me something of a fraud, I was bitterly determined to down you. I set about ingratiating myself into the good will and esteem of certain fellows on the team—certain fellows I felt confident I could sway to my will. Never mind who they are, Nelson, for they weren't wise to the depth of my game. Still, I knew I was getting them, one by one, just where I wanted them. I knew that in time, when I should be ready to make a split on the nine, I could swing them to my side and carry the majority of the players with me. That was my object, Nelson. I intended to make trouble on the team, break it up under your leadership, and then suggest reorganization, with the purpose of being chosen captain in your place."

Nelson leaped to his feet. "Why, you miserable scoundrel!" he cried furiously. "So that's what you were up to! I did smell a rat. I did think you were up to something underhanded.

So that was it, eh? You're a scrapper; you can box, they say. 'Take off your coat!'

Osgood made no move to rise. "We're not going to fight," he asserted calmly. "Did you think I was telling you this in order to provoke a fight?"

"I can't understand why under heaven you told me, anyhow."

"Simply because I was determined to relieve myself of some of the load I've been carrying. Simply because in the last few hours I've come to see the full meaning of my dirty scheming. Oh, I don't suppose you believe me, but that's the reason—anyhow, it's a part of the reason. And I'm done with it all, no matter what may happen to me to-morrow."

His breast heaving, his hands clenched, Nelson continued to stand glaring down at the calm, abject fellow before him. And there was something so genuinely abject in Osgood's appearance that gradually Jack felt his rage oozing away and leaving him.

"Sit down," invited Ned once more. "I'm not

half through. As long as I've begun on this thing, and said so much, I'm going to tell you more, although it's likely you'll hold me henceforth in the most complete contempt. You spoke of Shultz a moment ago. Do you know he's not the sort of fellow with whom I can have any real natural bond of sympathy?"

"I've always wondered at your chumminess with him," said Nelson slowly, reseating himself. "He's so different. You're a gentleman, while he's plainly of the most plebeian and common stock."

"He's no more plebeian and common than I am," declared Osgood instantly.

"But his family—he comes of a most ordinary family."

"So do I."

"You? Why, you have some high-grade ancestors behind you on your mother's side, at least."

"I wondered if you believed that, Nelson. If you did, it's plain you did not see through me completely, as I fancied."

“What? Do you mean to say that——”

“My father and mother were just poor, illiterate people, neither of whom could trace their pedigree back three generations. To tell you the plain truth, I don’t know anything whatever about my ancestors on either side.”

“But the family portraits you have, and the crest you use upon your stationery?”

“Pure bluff, nothing else. I picked those portraits up as I chanced to find them and fancied they would serve my purpose. Any one who wishes can get a stationer to put a crest on his writing-paper. My father started out in life as a tin peddler; my mother came from an orphan asylum. They settled on a little farm, and by hard work were able in time to buy more land. On that land some years ago oil was struck. It made them rich, and in a wonderfully short time my father drank himself to death.”

Pity was now supplanting anger in Nelson’s heart.

“But why—why did you put up such a bluff, Osgood?”

Again Ned shrugged. "Simply because I'm a sort of cad and bounder, I suppose. I've always felt grieved and hurt because I had no family behind me. It must be true that, although she came from an orphan asylum, my mother has good blood in her. Naturally, she had a little education, too, while my father could scarcely write his own name. Mother wished me to have an education and become a gentleman; on the other hand, my father had really no true conception of what the word gentleman meant. After he died mother sent me to school. I've attended four different schools. Two of them were in the middle West, and at both the truth regarding my parents was somehow learned. Although I had money, I met certain chaps who, as I could very well see, looked down on me. They came from good families, and even when they pretended to be hail-fellow-well-met with me, I could feel the hidden contempt in their hearts. It made me sore, Nelson. I hated those fellows.

"I wrote my mother about it; I told her about

it when I saw her. It's true that her health is not very good, and she has gone to Southern California. Why didn't she take me with her and put me into a school out there? If you could see her, you might understand. Her shoulders are bowed from work, and her hands are gnarled and knuckled. She knew that she would betray the truth to any one who might meet her. I knew it, too, and right there, when she proposed that we should be separated by the full width of the continent in order that I might attend some far school where there would be little danger of the truth coming out—right there I showed the real cad in my make-up. I accepted the proposition and went to Hadden Hall."

"But you didn't stay at Hadden."

"No. Shultz thinks I was compelled to leave that school for quite a different reason than the real one. One day a fellow showed up there to visit a friend—a fellow who knew me. I had been putting up the same bluff I've put up in Oakdale. I had far better rooms than I've been able to obtain here, and I was supposed to be

a remote descendant of British aristocracy. The fellow who knew me punctured that fabrication. I was exposed, and I got out. Then I chose a little school, where it seemed to me there would be no chance of any one recognizing me. That's what brought me to Oakdale."

CHAPTER XXIII.

ANOTHER SURPRISE.

At a loss for words, Nelson was silent. He was still unable to comprehend Osgood's motive for this confession. Perhaps Osgood himself did not know what had led him to make it, beyond the fact that he had suddenly been overcome by an intense desire to unburden himself in a measure.

The silence became awkward, and Jack stirred restlessly. His elbows on his knees, the other boy was staring broodingly at the ground. Roused by Nelson's movement, he lifted his head slowly.

"Well," he said, almost whimsically, "you see now what a cheap, common skate I am."

"A fellow who blunders and owns up to it, partly atones for his mistake, anyhow," returned Nelson. "We're none of us perfect, old chap.

We're all human, and we have our little failings."

"It's very decent of you to talk that way, Nelson. I didn't expect it. I had no reason to expect it. You've every right to be thoroughly disgusted with me, and I'm disgusted with myself."

"I can't see that you've actually harmed anybody yet."

"That's because you don't know everything. I haven't told you all."

"Great smoke!" exclaimed Jack. "Is there more to tell?"

"Some time, before long, when everything comes out, you'll be compelled to think even less of me than you do now."

"Look here," said Nelson suddenly, "do you know anything about the cause of this Hooker trouble? You must be referring to that; it can't be anything else."

"Whatever I know you will learn in time," was the evasive answer.

"You aren't responsible for his condition?"

"I didn't strike the blow."

"You *do* know about it! Why haven't you told before?"

"There may be various reasons. As one, you should see that it meant exposure for me; it meant looking into my past record and bringing to life the fact that I'm a faker."

"Now that you've told that much about yourself, I can't see any good reason why you should not tell it all. Seems to me it's your duty."

Osgood seemed to meditate again. "There are others concerned," he said presently, "and I have a duty to them as well as to myself. What I've told of my own affairs doesn't concern them, and I will claim that I've never yet played the squealer on any other chap."

"But the truth will have to come out."

"I haven't a doubt about that. Let it come. But when it does, let it come from the right source."

"I suspected that you must know something about it."

"Oh, yes, you've suspected me all along, Nel-

son. In possession of the facts I've given you, it will be a simple matter for you to show me up in Oakdale."

"If you imagine I'm going to run right away and tattle what you've practically told me in confidence, you've got me sized up wrong."

"I was not aware that I told it to you in confidence. I do not remember that I exacted from you a promise of secrecy."

"Perhaps that was because you thought I'd tell anyhow."

"I didn't think much about it. I didn't stop to think. When the impulse seized me, I simply went ahead and told."

"Perhaps you'll be sorry you did."

"Perhaps so, but it's done now."

Jack rose once more and placed a hand on his companion's shoulder.

"Osgood," he said, "I refuse to believe that a fellow with a conscience like yours can be thoroughly bad. Your natural impulses are right. You didn't bind me to secrecy, but I'll pledge you now that I'm not going to give you away."

"I don't suppose it will make any great difference whether you do or not," returned Ned unemotionally; "but I thank you for your good will. Hadn't we better look up the rest of the bunch? By this time they're probably wondering what has become of us."

As he was starting to rise, Jack gripped his shoulder, hissing:

"Keep still! What's that? Some one is coming this way!"

From a distance came the sounds of a body moving through the underbrush. Slowly the sounds drew nearer, ceasing at intervals, as if the person, if a person it was, paused now and then to rest or listen.

"Who do you suppose it is?" whispered Nelson. "It doesn't seem to me it can be one of the fellows coming back this way."

Osgood shook his head as he rose noiselessly to his feet. Looking at each other, the same thought filled their minds.

Perhaps it was Roy Hooker!

Not far from them, yet wholly concealed by

the thickets and the shadows, the moving object halted and remained silent for a long time. Gradually this silence wore upon their patience, and presently Nelson made signs indicating that he meant to investigate with all possible caution. Osgood nodded, and, side by side, they crept forward, stepping softly and peering anxiously into the gloom.

Beneath Nelson's foot a dead branch snapped with a report like a toy pistol. Almost instantly there was a movement in the thicket, a rushing sound, a crashing as of a person in flight.

"Confound it!" exclaimed Jack. "Come on, Osgood, let's run the thing down."

Through the bushes and the shadows, they dashed in pursuit. Osgood, following the other boy too closely, was lashed in the face by whipping branches, which stung and blinded him. At the first opportunity he turned aside and chose a course he believed to be parallel with that Nelson was pursuing. All at once he perceived they were no longer guided by sounds made by the one they were after, and he stopped short

to listen. The other boy ran on much farther before he also stopped.

Again the woods, bathed in the white light of the moon, seemed hushed and silent.

"Oh, Osgood! Where are you?"

It was Jack calling.

Ned had opened his lips to answer when something touched his ankle—touched it and gripped it. Looking down, he was amazed to see that it was a human hand thrust out from beneath a thick, low cluster of bushes, and for the moment the discovery robbed him of the power to make a sound.

The low bushes stirred. A head was pushed forth into a patch of moonlight, and to Ned's ears came a tremulous, choking whisper, full of fear and pleading:

"Don't answer, Osgood—for the love of goodness, don't answer!"

Ned was looking down into the distraught, fear-stricken face of Charley Shultz!

CHAPTER XXIV.

SHULTZ SEES A LIGHT.

Amazed beyond expression, Osgood continued to gaze downward at the haggard, woe-begone face of Shultz. Presently, recovering a bit, he asked:

“What in the world are you doing here, Charley?”

“Hush! Keep still!” pleaded the boy beneath the bushes. “He’ll hear you! There he is, calling again! Don’t answer! Don’t answer!”

“Why, it’s only Nelson,” said Ned, squatting beside the bushes. “We were chasing you. We thought you might be Hooker.”

“Hooker—oh!”

There was inexpressible terror and anguish in those two words, which seemed almost to choke the boy who uttered them.

Nelson was approaching, continuing to call Osgood’s name.

"Hide! hide!" urged Shultz. "Don't leave me! Oh, don't leave me now! Let him go! Get into these bushes and he won't see you!" Grasping Ned's coat, the pleading fellow sought to draw him into the shelter of the low bushes.

"Why don't you want him to see you?"

"I'll tell you—I'll tell you when he's gone. Quick! get in here!"

Wondering at the agitation of the fellow who had always seemed utterly incapable of such emotion, Osgood humored him by creeping into the thick mass of shrubbery. Thus concealed, he saw the dark figure of Nelson passing at a little distance, and all the while Shultz clung to him with hands that quivered and shook and seemed silently to beg him not to respond to the calls of the searching lad.

After a time Nelson could be heard no more. Then Ned crept forth, followed by Charley, who remained sitting on the ground with one leg outstretched.

"What's the meaning of this tomfoolery?" demanded Osgood, a bit sharply. "How in the

name of the seven wonders did you come to be here, anyhow? You weren't with the bunch that started out to find Hooker."

Again, at the sound of that name, Shultz shrank and cowered as if struck a blow.

"Don't speak of him—don't!" he sobbed. "It's an awful thing! Oh, if you only knew what I've suffered to-night!"

"Why, you're all to pieces, old man. You're completely broken up."

"I'm a wreck. I'm done for. It's a wonder I'm not crazy. I have been half-crazy. Why shouldn't I be, chased and hunted like a wild beast? It's enough to drive any one insane."

"Chased and hunted? What do you mean?"

"Oh, I know the whole town is after me. I barely got away from two of them who caught me flinging pebbles at your windows to wake you up."

Osgood stiffened a bit. "You—did—what?"

"When I found out what had happened, when I knew the worst, I cut across lots to Mrs. Ches-

ter's to wake you and tell you that I was going to run away. I was so excited I threw the pebbles against the wrong window, and when I went back to the street for more the men saw me and chased me. I doubled on them and threw them off the track."

"Those men must have been Turner and Crabtree. They thought they were chasing Roy Hooker."

"Hooker!" palpitated Shultz. "Hooker? He's dead! His ghost came to my window! It was perched on the ridgepole of the ell. I was just going to bed when I saw it. I'll never forget the terrible look in those eyes!"

Squatting on the ground beside the trembling fellow, Osgood grasped him firmly by the arm.

"What is this stuff you're telling me, Shultz?" he demanded. "You saw Hooker looking in at your window?"

"I tell you it was his ghost. I've never believed in such things, but I do now, for I've seen one. I saw it again, too, here in these very woods. It spoke to me. I heard it speak. Then

I ran and ran, until I fell into a gully and thought I'd broken my leg. It was my ankle. It's sprained and swollen, but I've been hobbling on it just the same. Oh, Osgood, isn't there any way for me to escape? If I hadn't hurt my ankle, I'd be miles on the road to Barville before this. I didn't mean to kill him. You know I didn't mean that, don't you? If they bring me to trial, you'll tell them you know that much, won't you, Ned?"

Osgood was moved almost to tears by this pathetic pleading.

"Now listen to me, Shultz," he commanded. "You've deceived yourself. Hooker isn't dead, unless he's died since he got out of bed to-night, escaped observation and left his home. If you really saw something that looked like Hooker on the roof of Caleb Carter's ell, it was Roy himself. If you met something in these woods that looked like Hooker, it was Hooker. He's wandering about somewhere in a deranged condition, and he's the one the people are searching for, not you."

Overwrought by the terror of his experience, it was no simple matter for Charley Shultz to comprehend the meaning of his companion's words.

"Hooker—not dead?" he muttered wildly. "Why, I—I was sure of it. How do you know, Ned? You may be mistaken."

Compelling Shultz to listen, Osgood finally succeeded in convincing him. "Let us hope with all our hearts," he concluded, "that they find Roy and get him safely home, and that he recovers. Let us hope, regardless of what it may mean to us, that, restored to his right mind, he'll soon be able to tell everything."

"Oh, I don't care if he does now," asserted Shultz. "If we'd only told in the first place, it would have been better. Piper was right; I should have owned up like a man. That was the thing for me to do. I refused to see it then, but what I've been through since has opened my eyes."

"It seems to me," said Ned gently, "that we've both had our eyes opened. Come, old fellow, let

me help you to your feet. You've got to get back to the village somehow, if I have to pack you on my back."

"I can hobble. If you'll give me an arm, I'll manage to cripple along. But I'm afraid to go back to Oakdale."

"It's the only thing you can do. There's no other way, old man. We've both of us got to face the worst, whatever it may be."

Shultz, indeed very lame, hung heavily on Osgood's arm, gritting his teeth and groaning at times with the pain his injured ankle gave him. In this manner they moved along slowly enough, keeping to the westward of Turkey Hill and making for the Barville road, as this was now the shortest and most direct course back to the village.

At intervals, as they went along, Shultz persisted in talking of the terrible experiences he had passed through that night, repeating over and over that he was intensely thankful because in all probability Roy Hooker was still living.

"If he had died without telling a word, I'd

never had a minute's peace in the world," he asserted. "I'd always felt like a murderer. I hope they find him all right. I don't care if he does tell."

"I didn't urge you to confess, did I, Shultz?"

"No, no, but I should have done it. I was afraid, that was the trouble. I was a coward. I didn't think it was fear at the time, but it was, just the same. I tried to make myself believe I was keeping still on your account. Well, really, I did think about what it would mean to you, Ned. You're different from me. You're a gentleman, and I'm just a plain rotter, I guess."

"Oh, I don't know as there's so much difference between us, after all."

"Yes, there is. You've got some family behind you, and you're naturally proud of it. I've never had any particular reason to be proud of my people. Why, my father is a saloonkeeper. I never told you that, did I? I didn't tell you, for I thought you might be disgusted and turn against me if you knew. I've always growled about my old man, because he didn't give me a

lot of spending money. The reason why he didn't was because I raised merry blazes when I had money. He used to let me have enough—too much. When I blew it right and left, like an idiot, and kept getting into scrapes, he cut my allowance down. You see the kind of a fellow you've been friendly with, Osgood, old man. You can see he's a rotter—just a plain rotter. Oh, you'll help me back to town. You'll do the right thing, because you're the right sort. But, now that you know what I am, we never could be friends any more, even if this Hooker business hadn't come up."

Osgood had permitted him to talk on in this fashion, although again and again Shultz's words made Ned cringe inwardly. At this point the listener interrupted.

"You're wrong, old man, if you believe anything you've said will make me think any the less of you. On the contrary, it will have precisely the opposite effect. You've told me all this about yourself, but there are a lot of things about myself that I've never told you. This is

hardly the time for it, but you shall know, and then you'll understand that we're practically on a common level. I'm no better than you are."

"You say that because you *are* better—because you're a natural gentleman, with blood and breeding. I don't think I ever before understood what makes a true gentleman. Oh, I've got my eyes open to heaps of things to-night."

"It's not impossible for a man to be a gentleman, even if he doesn't know who his own father and mother were," returned Osgood. "Breeding is all right, but there's a lot of rot in this talk about blood and ancestry."

"You never seemed specially proud of the fact that you had such fine ancestors behind you. I guess you're true American in your ideas, Osgood. For all of your family, you've always sort of pooh-poohed ancestry; and you with a perfect right to use a crest!"

Shultz was startled by the short, contemptuous laugh that burst from his companion's lips.

"The world is full of faking and fraud," said Ned. "It seems that half the people in it, at

least, are trying to make other people believe they're something which they are not. Does the ankle hurt bad, old chap?"

"Like blazes," answered Charley through his teeth.

"Let me see if I can't get you on to my back and carry you."

"Not on your life! I'm going to walk back to town on that pin if I never step on it again. I'll just take it as part of the punishment I deserve."

They came presently to the path which the boys had taken on their way to the island in the swamp, and at last they issued from the woods and reached the Barville road. Rounding the base at Turkey Hill, they saw the village lying before them in the valley, and to the right, over the tops of trees, they beheld the shimmering waters of Lake Woodrim. The sweet and peaceful scene seemed to hold no hint of the exciting events of that remarkable night.

Some distance down the road Shultz perceived a few dark, moving objects, and suddenly he halted in alarm.

"Some one coming, Ned!" he palpitated. "Look! you can see them. It's a party of searchers after Hooker! I can't face them! They'll ask questions. Come on, let's cut across into the pines yonder."

Not far away to the right was a growth of pine timber, which reached to the very shore of Lake Woodrim. Releasing Osgood's arm, Shultz made suddenly for the side of the road, scrambled over a low stone wall and started at a hobbling run toward the pines.

Osgood followed, quickly overtaking him. They were running side by side, Shultz's breath whistling through his teeth with a sound like hissing steam, when up before them from a little hollow, as if rising out of the very ground itself, came a human being, head bare, and all in white to its waist. One look he gave them, and then like a frightened deer he went bounding straight for the woods.

"Merciful wonders!" burst from Osgood. "It's Roy Hooker!"

CHAPTER XXV.

INTO THE OLD QUARRY.

For a double reason they did not call to Hooker; not only was it unlikely that he would heed them, but the men on the Barville road would doubtless hear their cries. So Osgood, who had been gauging his speed by that of the crippled Shultz, immediately shot forward, leaving Charley limping behind, but doing his utmost.

Realizing how difficult it would be to run down the deranged lad in the dark depths of the heavy pines, Ned strained every nerve to reach him before he could plunge into the woods. To his dismay, he quickly perceived that this would be impossible, Hooker being very fleet of foot. At the last moment Osgood ventured to call, suppressing his voice in a measure, and hoping against hope that the unreasoning fugitive might give heed.

"Roy—Roy Hooker!" he cried. "We're friends. We won't hurt you. Stop, Roy—stop! Wait for us!"

Had Hooker been stone deaf, the words would have had no more effect. Not a particle did he relax in his flight, and Ned was some rods away when Roy was swallowed by the black shadows of the timbers.

Into the woods Osgood dashed, still hoping that through some chance he might overtake the fleeing lad. There was not much undergrowth amid the pines, yet for a time the persistent pursuer was guided by the sounds of the other boy, who turned and twisted and zigzagged here and there in a most baffling way.

"We're friends, Roy—we're friends!" Osgood called again and again. "Don't be afraid of us! Wait a minute!"

It was useless. The guiding sounds grew fainter, and at last, unable to hear them, Osgood stopped to listen. Then he realized that behind him Shultz was calling, begging not to be abandoned.

"We were so close, so close!" muttered Ned, in deep disappointment. "If we'd only got a little nearer before he started, I could have run him down."

He answered Shultz, and presently Charley came hobbling and panting through the darkness.

"Did you catch him?" was his first question.

"No, he got away; but he's somewhere in these woods, and, knowing that much, we may be able to find him yet. If we could only take him safely back to Oakdale, it might seem to square up a little for what we've done."

"I was afraid you'd leave me," Shultz almost whimpered. "I was afraid to be left alone again. Don't do it, Ned—please don't. If you hear him or see him, don't run away from me."

Only yesterday Osgood could never have dreamed it possible for anything so completely to break the nerve of his companion. There was little left of the old stubborn, defiant, bulldozing Shultz; in his abject terror of being left alone, he was more like a timid child.

"We ought to get searchers, a whole lot of

them, and bring them here," said Ned. "That would be the right thing to do."

"But if we could only find him ourselves without other aid," argued Charley, "it would give us a better show with the people who'll be ready enough to jump on us when they know the truth. We might find him, you know. He can't be far away. Which way was he going the last you knew?"

"Toward the lake, I think, but he kept dodging about, so that there is no real certainty of it. Probably he hasn't any objective point in his mind. He just ran in any direction that happened to be the easiest."

"The ground slopes toward the lake," reasoned Shultz. "He'll keep on going that way."

"There may be some logic in that, and there's a bare chance that we may come upon him again. Let's make as little noise as possible. We don't want him to be warned or frightened by hearing us a long distance away."

Down through the black woods they went, Shultz seeking to keep so close to Osgood that

he could put out his hand any time and touch him. Presently through the trees they saw the moonlight silvering the placid water. Reaching the shore, they discovered they were close to Pine Point, which, projecting into the lake, cut it there to its narrowest width. On the opposite shore lay the railroad, over which Shultz had first thought of making his escape from Oakdale.

"It's something like searching for a needle in a haystack," said Ned hopelessly. "There's not one chance in a hundred that we, unaided, can find Hooker in these woods."

But Charley still clung to the tattered skirts of hope. "Let's go out upon the point. From the end of it we can get a look at a long sweep of shore in both directions."

"That will simply make us walk farther, and your ankle must be——"

"Confound my ankle! Don't you worry about that."

"You shouldn't be crippling around on it. It's

liable to lay you up for a long time, and every step you take makes it worse."

"What do I care? What do I care how long I'm laid up? That's nothing now. I'm going out on the point."

He would not have gone had Ned refused, but Osgood decided to humor him.

At the outer extremity the point took a curve, so that on one side it sheltered Bear Cove, into which Silver Brook emptied. As they reached that curving outer shore, a small boat—a punt—issued from the cove, passed that hook-like nose of land and appeared in the moonlight which bathed the surface of the lake. The occupant of the punt, who was propelling it with a paddle, was Hooker!

"There he is!" shouted Charley.

He turned his face toward them, and they were so near that they almost fancied they could see the wild expression in his eyes. They called to him again and again, begging him to come back and seeking to give him every assurance of their friendly intentions. He did not answer;

changing the course of the boat somewhat, he drove it with powerful strokes toward a small island which lay off the mouth of the cove.

"It's no use," muttered Osgood; "he'll give up only when he's caught, and then he'll probably make a fight of it."

"But how are we going to catch him?"

"I wish I knew. If we had another boat——"

"I know where there's a raft," exclaimed Shultz. "We might follow him with that."

"We never could overtake him on a raft."

"But he's going on to Bass Island. If he doesn't see us coming, we might catch him there."

Ned was extremely doubtful, but the insistence and eagerness of Charley finally led him to agree to look for the raft. Fully half an hour passed before they found it lying partly on the shore of the cove not far from the mouth of Silver Brook. It was a rather long, narrow affair, built of small logs fastened together by cross-pieces. When it was launched they tested its buoying capacity and found it would barely support them

both. Nevertheless, with pieces of board for paddles, they pushed off upon it and made their way slowly toward the mouth of the cove. Both knelt as they wielded the board paddles, and their knees were soon wet with the water which occasionally washed across the almost submerged logs.

Although they could not see the punt on the shore of the island, they felt certain Hooker had landed there, and, hoping he would not discover their approach, they exerted their strength in the effort to reach the place as soon as possible.

The island was not more than thirty yards distant when they again saw the punt, headed this time for the farther shore of the lake. It seemed that Hooker must have been watching, and, with almost tantalizing cunning, he had waited until they were near before he put out from the opposite side of the island.

"Let's not give up," pleaded Shultz. "Let's follow him."

Although the pursuit seemed discouragingly hopeless, they were now nearly half-way across

the narrow part of the lake, and Osgood did not insist on turning back.

The punt was slow enough, but it moved faster than the raft, even though the latter was propelled by two persons instead of one, and gradually it drew farther and farther away. With their eyes on Hooker, they watched him reach the shore, leap out, abandon the punt and run toward the railroad. Still watching, they saw him, later, making his way down the track toward Oakdale station.

As soon as the raft touched the low, flat shore, they left it to float whither it might and followed Roy.

"I'm glad he went toward town," said Osgood, as they reached the railroad.

Shultz's ankle seemed to have grown much worse while he was on the raft, and it was in great pain and with the utmost difficulty that he crippled along over the ties. At times he caught his breath with a hissing sound or groaned aloud as the swollen limb gave him an extra sharp twinge.

"It's no use for me to follow Roy any farther," he finally admitted. "I'll be lucky if this old prop doesn't give out completely before I get to the village."

"If it does," promised Ned, "I'll get you there. Leave it to me. I'm ready to pack you on my back any time."

Presently they approached the old lime quarries, which had been practically abandoned until Lemuel Hayden came to Oakdale, bought them, opened up new and unsuspected deposits, and revived the industry of lime burning. They could see the deserted workings, a tremendous black hole in the ground some thirty or forty rods away, when from beneath the shadowy bank of the graded roadbed, Hooker, who may have been resting there, sprang forth. Shultz saw his first movement, and shouted to Osgood:

"There he is, Ned! Catch him—you can catch him now!"

Ned did not need to be urged; he was off like a shot. Shultz followed, setting his teeth and trying to forget his injured ankle. Down the

bank he leaped, mainly upon one foot, and on he ran, limping across the rough and stony field. He could see Osgood straining every nerve to overtake Hooker, who was running straight toward the old quarry.

"He's got him! Ned's got him!" panted Shultz. "The quarry will stop him! He can't get away!"

But, as they drew near that mammoth hole in the ground, a different thought leaped into Osgood's mind. Hooker seemed to be fleeing blindly and totally heedless of anything. What if, in his distraught state of mind, he should not realize the danger that lay in his path? What if he should not see the quarry until it was too late to stop?

Horried, Ned shouted a warning; and at that shout Hooker, still running, turned his head to look back.

Shultz, seeing all this, gulped to keep his heart from choking him. Sick and weak with apprehension, he stopped, his arms outflung, his hands wide open, his fingers spread apart.

Over the brink and into the quarry plunged

Hooker. As he fell, a wild and terrible scream rose from his lips. Shultz clapped his hands to his ears to shut out that dreadful cry.

"Oh! oh!" he groaned. "It's all over now! That's the end! He's dead!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE CONFESSION.

Distracted, scarcely realizing what he did, with that terrible cry from Hooker's lips still ringing in his ears, Charley Shultz turned from the old quarry and limped away as fast as he could go. In his mind he carried a dreadful picture of Roy Hooker, lying bleeding, battered and dead at the bottom of that great excavation, and for the time being Osgood was wholly forgotten.

On his hands and knees, Charley crawled up the railroad embankment. One of his hands happening to touch a stout, crooked stick, about a yard in length, he grasped and retained it instinctively. When the track was reached, the stick served him for a cane as he hobbled away.

"It's awful—awful!" his dry, bloodless lips kept repeating. "And I'm to blame for it all!"

I'm the only one who is really to blame. I thought some of the rest should help shoulder the load, but I was wrong. It's up to me; I can see that plainly enough at last. If I'd only seen it in the first place, perhaps—perhaps this terrible thing might not have happened."

After a time he remembered Osgood, and halted, looking back toward the quarry.

"Why doesn't he come? Why is he staying there? He can't do anything now. Well, perhaps it's best that I should go it alone. That's what I ought to do. No one else should be seen with me. I must face this thing by myself. What will they do with me? I don't know and I don't care. All I know is that I can never, never forget, if I live to be a thousand years old."

His teeth set, he crippled onward, his ankle, if possible, causing him greater distress than ever, though it seemed as a mere nothing compared with the anguish of his remorseful and repentant soul. Not once were the shooting pains sufficient to wring a whimper or a groan from him.

His mind was made up at last; he had decided what he would do, and he was almost fierce in his eagerness to do it before he should weaken or falter.

The South Shore Road, approaching the railroad at one point, promised an easier course to follow, and he abandoned the ties. Vaguely he wondered what the hour could be, and looked for some sign of approaching dawn, as it seemed that the night must be far spent. To him that night had stretched itself to the length of a lifetime. Into it had been crowded experiences which had wrought in this boy a complete change of heart. In the moulding of his character such experiences must indeed have a powerful effect.

Beyond the river, as he drew near the dam at the lower end of the lake, he could see a few lights still shining palely in the windows of the village. Little had he imagined, when he first came to this small, despised country town, that here he was to face the first great crisis of his life. Here, it now seemed, he had met with disaster that meant his complete undoing.

The little railroad station on the southern side of the river was dark and deserted. Near it he halted again, tempted by the thought that somewhere around those black buildings he might hide until the first train should pull out in the morning—might hide there, and, sneaking aboard that train at the last moment, succeed, after all, in making his escape.

“But I won’t do it!” he suddenly snarled. “I attempted to run away like a coward, and this is what I’ve come to. I won’t try it again. I’ll face the music and pretend that I’ve got a little manhood left.”

Beneath the span of the bridge the water flowed swift and silent, save for a few faint whisperings and gurglings. Looking down at it, he drew away from the railing, fearful that he might be tempted to leap and end it all. Had he been met at the foot of Main Street by officers, waiting to place him under arrest, he would not have been surprised, and would have offered no resistance.

Once before upon this same night he had

sneaked up Cross Street, and again he followed the same course. Something like a powerful magnet now seemed drawing him on, although as yet he but faintly realized that he was moving toward Hooker's home as fast as he could.

The house was lighted in almost every room. In front of it he halted again, struggling weakly against that attracting force. In there was Roy's mother—the mother of the boy he had destroyed—waiting distractedly for some tidings of her unfortunate son. How could he face her? How could he utterly crush her with the terrible truth?

As he faltered and wavered, he became aware that some one was coming up Cross Street. In the silence, even at that distance, he heard the sound of footsteps.

"Some of the searchers—Roy's father, perhaps—returning to tell her that they have not found him. When they do find him—oh, when they do!"

Then he thought of another house, a modest little white cottage, farther up the street. It

was to that cottage that he should go, after all. There he would find the one to whom his confession should be made. This decided on, he forced his stiff and swollen ankle to bear him a little farther, with the aid of the stick, which clumped upon the sidewalk as he hobbled. There was a light in one of the windows of the cottage, the window of Professor Richardson's study. The professor was awake. He was there in his study, waiting for some news of Roy. Well, he should soon know it all.

Shultz rang the door-bell, and barely had he done so when he heard some one hastening to answer. Through the sidelights of the door came the gleam of a lamp. A key turned in the lock, the door was flung open, and the old professor, in dressing-gown and slippers, lamp in hand, stood before Charley Shultz.

"What is it?" he eagerly asked, his voice hoarse and husky. "You've come to tell me. They have found him?"

"I've come to tell you everything, professor,"

was the answer. "May I come in? I'm ready to drop. I can't stand a minute longer."

"Come in, my boy—come in. Good gracious! you're in rags. You're lame! You're hurt!"

Having closed the door, the professor sought to aid his visitor to hobble into the study, which opened off the hall. In that room Shultz dropped heavily upon a chair, the stick, released by his nerveless hands, falling with a thud upon the rug.

"My goodness!" breathed the old man, staring aghast at the boy. "You must have been through a terrible experience. You're ghastly pale, and your face is scratched and cut. What has happened to you?"

"Oh, I don't know how I can tell you! But I must, and I will. That's why I came here. I should have told you long ago. You were right, professor—you were right when you said it was a cowardly thing for the one who was to blame to keep silent. I didn't understand then, but now I do—now that it's too late!"

"Too late!" breathed Professor Richardson,

intensely moved. "Too late! Do you mean that Roy is——"

"He's dead," said Shultz.

Groping for a chair, the old man grasped it and sank upon it.

"Dead!" he echoed, running his thin hands through the white locks upon his temples. "This is terrible news, indeed! I've been hoping they would find him and bring him back all right. It will be a dreadful blow to his poor parents. How do you know? Are you sure—are you sure he's dead?"

"Yes, I'm sure. And I killed him!"

A few moments of absolute silence followed this declaration. Grasping the arm of the chair, the professor leaned slowly forward, his lips parted a bit, his eyes fastened upon the face of the boy. One hand was partly extended as he whispered:

"You—you killed him? What are you saying, Charley Shultz? Are you crazy?"

"No, no; but it's a wonder I'm not. Listen, professor, and I'll tell you the whole story. It

started over a game of cards. He accused me of cheating. I struck him. I knocked him down. As he fell his head hit against a marble mantelpiece. That was what ailed him. No one else did a thing, professor; no one else is to blame. They wanted me to tell, but I refused. One fellow insisted that I should tell."

"But why didn't they tell, themselves?"

"Because they were afraid. Because they knew the disgrace and trouble it would bring on them all. Besides, I was the one who did it, and I was the one who should have owned up to it."

"But you said—that Roy—was dead."

"So he is. Listen, and I'll tell you how I know. You shall have the whole story."

Shultz told it all, holding nothing back save the names of the other participants in that game of poker. He made no effort to shield himself, no attempt to justify himself, and there was no need to question him; for his story, although given in short, broken sentences, was vivid and complete. When he told at last of Hooker's blind

plunge into the old quarry, the listener groaned aloud.

"That's all, professor—that's all," Shultz concluded, in a manner that bespoke his boundless contrition and utter resignation to consequences. "You can see that it was I who killed him, and whatever my punishment may be, I deserve it."

"It's terrible!" said the old man solemnly. "It's the most terrible thing that has ever come beneath my personal notice in all my life!"

In the hall the bell of a telephone began to ring, causing them both to start nervously. Immediately the man rose to his feet.

"It must be a call from the Hooker's," he said. "I'm on the same party line with them. Roy's mother must be ringing up to ask me if I've heard anything. How can I answer? What can I tell that poor woman?"

Shultz, sick with pain of body and mind, could make no reply to this. Slowly, reluctantly, the professor left the study to answer the phone. Listening, Shultz could hear his words:

"Hello. . . . Yes, this is Professor Richardson

....What's that? I don't understand you.... Is that you, Mr. Hooker?....Yes, yes. What are you telling me? Roy—Roy is——" His voice, husky and broken, became confused, and he seemed a bit incoherent. "Yes, yes," he went on more plainly. "I think—I think I understandYes, I'll come down. Right away."

The receiver clicked upon the hook. Professor Richardson re-entered the study with a firm tread, stopped in front of the chair on which Charley Shultz still sat, and for a few silent moments gazed sternly at the cowering lad. Presently he said:

"The call was from Mr. Hooker. I'm going down there. You'll wait here for me, while I get on my shoes and coat. Wait here. Do you understand?"

"Yes," answered Charley faintly.

During the few minutes while the professor was absent Shultz sat there nervously clasping and unclasping the fingers of his cold hands. For a single moment, dreading what he might yet have to face upon this eventful night, he

thought of stealing from the house and hurrying away. Only for a fleeting moment, however, did he harbor that thought.

"Never!" he whispered savagely. "Whatever I must face I'll face. I'm done with being a coward!"

The professor reappeared, wearing his overcoat. "Come," he said, and Shultz lifted himself to his feet. In the hall the man secured his hat. They left the house, and Shultz managed to descend the front steps with the aid of his stick. On the street the professor gave the boy an arm.

The door of the Hooker home was opened almost instantly at their summons.

"Come in," cried Roy's father; "come in, professor. Oh! you've some one with you."

"Yes," replied the principal of the academy, "I brought Charley with me for a most excellent reason, as you'll soon learn. He has hurt his ankle and is very lame."

In the sitting room Shultz staggered and

nearly fell, for he suddenly found himself face to face with Ned Osgood.

"You?" he exclaimed in amazement. "You here? Then you've told them everything!"

Osgood seized him, swept him off his feet and practically bore him into another room.

"Look, Charley!" he cried, pointing at a person who sat in the depths of a big easy-chair, near which hovered Mrs. Hooker. "Here he is! He's all right now, too. He's all right, for he can talk and he remembers."

The person on the easy-chair was Roy Hooker!

CHAPTER XXVII.

LIKE A MIRACLE.

Only for Osgood's sustaining arm, Shultz would have collapsed completely. Ned helped him to a chair, where he sat staring in dumb amazement and doubt at Roy Hooker. It was a marvel of marvels, a miracle beyond his understanding.

"I'm dreaming," he thought. "It can't be true."

But Roy was there. Roy was speaking. Shultz heard him say:

"You look to be in worse condition than I am, old fellow. You're all broken up."

Shultz was broken up indeed. Not a sound ~~did~~ he make, but he covered his face with his hands, and tears began trickling through his fingers. Then he felt some one touching him gently, reassuringly, and heard the husky voice

of Professor Richardson, the man he had scorned and sneered at, saying gently, almost tenderly:

"There, there, my boy. It's all right. You made a mistake, as we all do sometimes, but you've been punished more than enough. I am sure no one could wish you to receive further punishment."

Then Hooker spoke again:

"Why, he wasn't to blame any more than I was—not as much. I started it. I lost my head and called him nasty names and tried to hit him. I'm the one who is really to blame for everything."

Somehow this made Charley's tears flow the faster. He did not sob, he did not speak, but he sat there with a great feeling of gratitude in his heart and a yearning to say something to Roy Hooker which he knew he never could say.

"We were all to blame," asserted Ned. "No one fellow should try to take it on himself; I'm dead certain other chaps in the bunch will agree to that."

"It will be a lesson to you all," said the old

professor. "Mrs. Hooker, I congratulate you that your son is again in his normal mind and apparently not much the worse for his experience. It has been a trying time for us all, and we should be thankful indeed that it has turned out so well."

Through his tear-wet eyelashes Shultz was looking at Roy.

"I—I don't understand," he whispered. "I saw him fall into the old quarry."

"But you didn't wait to see how far he fell," said Ned. "I looked. Perhaps twenty feet below the brink over which he ran, I saw him lying on a wide projecting shelf of rock. He was stunned, and he lay perfectly still, without answering when I called to him. I knew I must get him out somehow, and in a minute or two I thought that I might find a rope in one of the tool houses of the new quarry. I ran around there as fast as I could, broke into one of those little shanties, found a rope and hurried back. Making one end of the rope fast, I lowered myself to the shelf on which Roy still lay. He was just

coming to his senses, and when he saw me he spoke. Of course, he had no idea where he was or how he came to be there, for he could remember nothing that happened after his head struck the mantelpiece in my room."

"And I can't remember now," put in Hooker. "It's all a blank."

"When he had recovered and seemed to be pretty strong," Osgood continued, "I tied the rope about his body beneath his arms. Then I climbed back out of the quarry and succeeded in pulling him up, almost inch by inch. He could help me some by grasping the rough places in the face of the rock and by getting a few footholds now and then. As soon as he was safely out, we hoofed it for town."

"It's likely," said Professor Richardson, "that Roy struck his head when he fell, and that shock restored his lost memory."

"And I've got my boy again," said Mrs. Hooker, embracing her son and kissing him. "That's enough. I am satisfied and happy."

"I don't think anybody should kick up a big

muss over this affair," said Roy's father. "Now when I was a boy, I got into some scrapes myself. I guess most men are too apt to forget the fool things they did when they were youngsters."

"That is very true," agreed the professor. "Maturity cuts us off from true sympathy with boyhood and youth, and we are almost certain to become too exacting and too harsh toward lads who invariably find experience the best teacher. I have tried not to forget this myself, but I presume I am like others, in a measure, at least."

"Say," broke in Mr. Hooker suddenly, "while we're chinning here, we've forgotten something. We've forgotten there are parties of searchers out looking for Roy this minute. It was agreed that the Methodist bell should be rung when he was found. I think I'd better see about it that that bell rings."

"Yes," nodded Professor Richardson, "and we've forgotten something else as well. Charley has a sprained ankle, and I fear it is badly hurt, even though he managed to get around on it for a long time after it was injured. He should

have the attention of a doctor as soon as possible."

"Sure thing," said Mr. Hooker. "I'll send Dr. Grindle here right away. I'll have to pass his house on the way to tell them to ring the bell."

Finding his hat, he hurried from the house, and it was not long before the doctor appeared.

While the ankle was being bathed and bandaged, the church bell flung forth to the scattering band of searchers the message that the one they sought was found. Once before on that night Charley had listened to the notes of that bell and trembled with terror. He trembled again, but it was with great joy, and in the midst of good resolutions, which, though unspoken then, he silently vowed should be faithfully remembered and faithfully kept.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

COMRADES ALL.

Charley was sitting on a big chair, his bandaged ankle resting on cushions piled in another chair, when Ned Osgood came to see him at noon the following day. Ned had visited him early that morning, but now he returned with his face aglow and his tongue eager with a message.

"How's the ankle, Shultzie?" he cried.

"Oh, it's pretty well," was the answer. "Of course it gives me fits, especially when I have to move it a little, but then, I guess I can stand it." He looked at Ned almost entreatingly.

Osgood drew a chair close and sat down.

"The fellows all want to know how you're coming on," he said. "Of course I've had to tell them all about it."

"Confound it!" exclaimed Shultz. "I don't

count in this business. How's Hooker? That's what I want to know."

"I've been to see him, too. He didn't come to school this morning, but he's all right, just the same. Says he's stiff and lame, and all that, but thinks he'll be frisky enough in a day or two."

"Does he—does he seem to be all right—in his head?" faltered Charley anxiously.

"Oh, sure. There's nothing the matter with him."

"Well, I'm mighty glad to hear it. You know I've been worrying—I just couldn't help it. I kept thinking he might have a relapse or something—might lose his memory again."

"Pooh! Nonsense! The doctor says he's O. K. and he'll stay so."

"That's great, Ned."

"Funny," said Osgood, "but the first thing he did was to ask about you."

"I don't see why he should care a rap about me. If it hadn't been for me——"

"Oh, cut that out! It's plain bosh. Nobody

thinks for a minute of putting it all on you, much less Hooker."

"You know, old man, I wish I could have said something when Roy spoke up the way he did last night and declared he was to blame. I felt something—something inside of me here, but I couldn't say it to save my life. After I'm gone, I hope you'll tell Hooker that I think him a dandy, a brick, the finest fellow in the world."

"After you're gone? What do you mean by that?"

"Of course I can't go right away with this old ankle the way it is, but when it gets better so that I can leave Oakdale——"

"Leave Oakdale!" exploded Osgood. "Why are you going to leave Oakdale? Tell me that."

"Why, Ned, I don't see how I'm going to stay here. Professor Richardson was mighty decent last night, but of course I knew that was because he thought I'd had enough just then. He can't want me back in the school, and there must be lots of fellows who'd shy at me, too. Once it wouldn't have worried me if two-thirds of them

had handed me the frosty, but now I'm—I'm sort of changed. I seem to be weak and lacking in backbone, and I know I couldn't stay in the school with a lot of the fellows that way, even if Prof was willing I should stay."

"Now you listen to me, Shultzie," said Osgood earnestly. "I've had a talk with the professor, and he's coming to see you to-night."

"Oh, I don't believe I want to see him again. I don't believe I can. You know I said some mighty nasty things about him behind his back. I tried to turn the fellows against him, and he knows it."

"But you can bet he's willing to forget that, Charley, and he will never mention it unless you do. Between you and me, Prof is a pretty fine old boy. We had him sized up all wrong."

"I reckon we did, Ned. Just because he was along in years and old-fashioned in some of his ways, we didn't understand him at all. You know he said last night that most men didn't understand boys. Well, it's my opinion that few boys

understand men, especially men like Prof Richardson."

"I won't put up an argument on that point. You'll be welcomed back to school by him, Shultz, and you'll be welcomed just as heartily by the fellows. Why, when Piper heard just how you owned up and tried to take all the blame, he was enthusiastic about you. Said you'd proved yourself a white man all the way through."

"But he didn't know what I'd been through to bring me to that point."

"That doesn't make any difference. Say, do you know the way the fellows behaved toward me made me mortally ashamed of myself? Charley, they actually thought I did something commendable last night. They seem to have the idea that just because I pulled Hooker out of the old quarry I'm a real hero. And you can't make them see it any other way, either. Jack Nelson nearly broke my paw shaking hands with me."

"Nelson!" muttered Shultz. "If he only knew!"

"He does. He knows the whole business. I told him while we were alone in the woods last night."

"And he shook hands with you to-day?"

"That's what he did."

"Well, he must be pretty white himself."

"White? He's as fine a chap as one could find in a year's hunt. Now look here, old fellow, I'll tell you just what we're going to do, you and I. You're coming to school again as soon as you can get there. We're going to stay right here in Oakdale and prove that we're somewhere near as decent as the fellows we've met in this town. We're going to prove to Professor Richardson that we're not a couple of cheap trouble-makers. We're going to try our level best to do just about what's right. Do you get me?"

There was a gleam in Shultz's eyes; a smile broke over his face; he thrust out his hand for Osgood to take.

"I get you, Ned," he returned, his voice vibrant with deep earnestness. "You're right; that's just what we'll do, as long as we're to be given

the chance. And say, I'm mighty glad to have the chance."

When Shultz returned to the academy on crutches several days later, he was immediately surrounded by a crowd of boys who welcomed him back in no uncertain manner. First among those to hail him and shake his hand was Roy Hooker, and he was followed closely by Jack Nelson. Billy Piper was not among the last to grip Charley's fingers, and there was no uncertain sincerity in his tone, as he said:

"Shultzie, you're all right. You proved it. Say, it's just ripping to have you back."

"Old man," said Nelson, "you want to get that ankle cured as soon as you can. The nine is crippling along without you, but I tell you we miss you out there in center field."

"That's right," said Chub Tuttle, gulping down a mouthful of half-chewed peanuts. "It's a rotten shame, the mess I make of it trying to cover that patch. I lost the game last Saturday by

muffing a ball you could have caught without half trying."

Grant, Crane, Stone and others all had a cheerful word for Charley, and while they were expressing themselves, Professor Richardson came pushing gently through the throng and clapped both his hands on the abashed boy's shoulders.

"Well, well," said the principal, beaming, "here you are again. That's fine, I declare. You ought to be able to throw away those crutches in a few days. Do you know, I actually attended the last baseball game, and, on my word, I found it very interesting. I believe I've been missing something, and when it is possible I think I shall take the games in hereafter."

Was this the "old foggy back number" Shultz had so often sneered about and derided? Why, instead of being sour and crabbed, this man was genial and gentle and sympathetic. Charley wondered how he had ever happened to misjudge the professor so greatly. The boy felt his heart swelling with the gladness and camaraderie of it

all, and to keep the mist out of his eyes, he laughed, a genuine, sincere, happy laugh, amazingly unlike his laughter of former days. He was a lucky fellow; oh, yes, he knew it very well. He was different; he knew that, too, and he would never again be as he had been once, thank goodness.

When Osgood got a chance to speak to Shultz unheard by others, he laughingly said:

"I told you how it would be. Now you've seen for yourself, and you ought to be satisfied."

"Satisfied?" said Charley. "That word doesn't express my feelings, Ned, and I don't believe there's a word in the language that can express them."

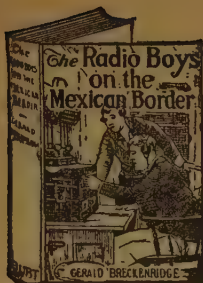
Professor Richardson's troubles were indeed over; during the remainder of the term he was not disturbed by even the faintest show of insubordination or unruliness among his pupils, who seemed to vie with one another in their efforts to make the old principal's duties not only easy but pleasant.

When Shultz next visited Osgood's rooms, he

noticed, not without surprise and wonderment, that all the old "family portraits" had disappeared. Not only that: Ned was using plain and simple writing paper, unadorned by a crest.

These two boys both became genuinely popular in Oakdale, and their splendid playing upon the baseball field caused many members of opposing teams to express admiration and envy, and to assert that it was mainly through the fine work of Osgood and Shultz that Oakdale won the championship that season.

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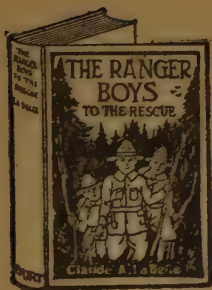
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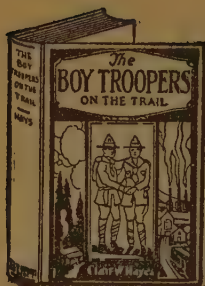
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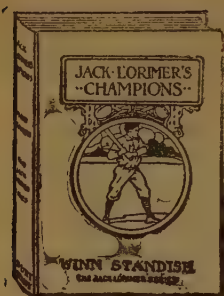
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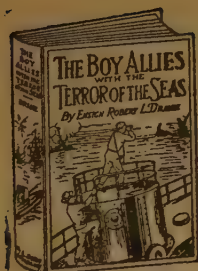
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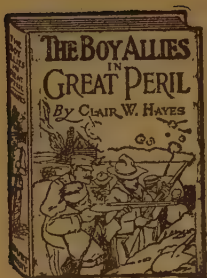
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